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**Sarah A. Curtis**, *Educating the Faithful: Religion, Schooling, and Society in Nineteenth-Century France*. Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000. xii + 255 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$38.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-87580-262-1.

Review by Barry H. Bergen, Gallaudet University.

Much of the recent scholarship on primary education in nineteenth-century France has moved us away from the traditional focus on the center and the top of the institutional structure toward the periphery, toward women, and toward the “bottom,” as it were, of the top-down perspective so dominant in earlier work. Thus, books by Sharif Gemie, Deborah Reed-Danahay, Stephen Harp, Anne Quartararo, and others help us to understand the role of women in shaping the educational system, the strategies of rural Frenchmen to get education for their children, education in Alsace-Lorraine, and other previously neglected aspects of primary education. In other significant work, Harrigan and Grew’s detailed statistical study of primary education, *School, State and Society*, emphasizes the importance of long-standing patterns at the periphery in resisting the centralizing efforts of the state.[1] At least one significant lacuna remains in this literature: the study of the religious and “congregational” schools, in opposition to which the triumphant public schools are defined and understood. While Harrigan and Grew’s *School, State and Society* counts the congregational schools and helps to underline their importance, and Yves Déloye’s *Ecole et citoyenneté* traces the largely unsuccessful resistance of the church to the secularization of morality and civics instruction while examining the attempt to create citizens in the schools at the level of the students, until now these schools have been little studied. Most of the existing studies that touch on them concern the politics of secularization, as, for example, those of Ozouf and Chevallier.[2] A number of regional studies address the religious schools along with the secular ones to varying degrees (Gildea less so, Peneff more so, though the latter is not, strictly speaking, about the nineteenth century).[3] Pierre Zind’s study of religious education in the public schools of the Second Empire is somewhat limited in scope, and Marcel Launay’s short but substantial overview of the relations between church and schooling rarely dips below the level of a national perspective.[4] Sarah Curtis’s *Educating the Faithful* thus constitutes a welcome and important addition to the literature. She examines the religious schools, their teachers, and the teaching in them at a level much closer to that which individual teachers and students experienced, in greater detail, and with as deep or deeper an understanding of the congregations and their schools than any previous study. It deserves a wide readership not only among those interested in the history of education and religion, but also in the general social and intellectual history of modern France.

Nevertheless, the subtitle of this work, *Religion, Schooling, and Society in Nineteenth-Century France*, is slightly misleading, insofar as Curtis has not written a national study of catholic primary education in the nineteenth century, but rather a regional study of the diocese of Lyon, encompassing the departments of the Rhône and the Loire. This constitutes a formidable undertaking on its own. The difficulty of gathering information about the congregational schools, given their relative lack of centralized administration and their division among a variety of religious houses, constitutes a major reason for their neglect in the literature. Although Curtis has endeavored to place this diocese in the

context of national developments, *Educating the Faithful* remains a regional study whose applicability to France as a whole remains more assumed than demonstrated. In her introduction, Curtis points more to the peculiarities of the Rhône and the Loire than to their representativeness. She identifies the diocese as “ideal” for studying “the richness of Catholic education” because of its exceptionally high levels both of school attendance and of enrollment in the catholic schools: “Catholic education in this diocese came as close to being universal as anywhere in France” (p. 13). Such a characterization suggests to me a region important to understand, but hardly typical. As with the regional studies of Gildea and Peneff, one longs for this work to be balanced by the study of an area with a predominant strain of anti-clericalism, or at least a low level of religious school attendance.

Given the nature of the sources, however, regional and departmental studies of religious education seems the most sensible approach to a rather intractable subject matter, and it is not surprising that a study of congregational schools should focus on a region rich in them. But my insistence on the difference between a truly national study and a regional one is significant in judging Curtis’s most important argument: that catholic education constituted a part of the “modernization of France,” rather than a force working against it (p. 10). In short, Curtis contends that the congregational schools filled the huge gaps in the state’s provision of schools and teachers from 1815 to 1850, and in so doing provided models for pedagogy, organization, and curriculum that would deeply influence the state’s system of education as it developed slowly over the course of the nineteenth century. Thus, she believes, the congregational schools in particular, and religion in general, through their influence on the public primary schools, helped to create “modern France,” including the public secular school system (and through it the modern welfare state), to a far greater extent than is usually acknowledged. I believe that Curtis somewhat overstates this case even for the diocese of Lyon, and that the applicability of her conclusions to other less heavily catholic regions remains to be explored. Nevertheless, given that the secularization of the public schools constitutes one of the major accomplishments of the French state in the nineteenth century, the nature and evolution of congregational schools represents a crucial counterweight to the heavy emphasis on the state system of education which dominates the literature on the schools of France in the nineteenth century, and Curtis’s study constitutes a significant contribution to our knowledge of catholic primary education. This important work forces us to reconsider the complex influences and interactions of secular and religious schooling and of public and private schools in nineteenth-century France and to accord to the religious schools a far more significant long-term influence than they have generally received.

*Educating the Faithful* is divided into two parts. The first, “Inventing the Parish School,” covers the years from 1801 to 1870. The second, “Catholic Schooling on the Defensive,” addresses the early years of the Third Republic, from 1870 to 1905, the period of state-led secularization, culminating in the complete prohibition of monks and nuns from all teaching in 1904, and the complete separation of church and state in 1905. Part I is divided into four chapters, which examine, in turn, creating and provisioning of schools, the supply of congregational teachers, the corporate identity of the teaching congregations, and the pedagogy of the catholic schools. Chapter one illuminates the importance of the Catholic Church and teaching congregations in providing schools for vast numbers of French children in the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century. The catholic emphasis on schooling, Curtis finds, was newly revived after the Revolution: seven of the nine “main” teaching congregations in the diocese were founded in the nineteenth century. This chapter contains two highly significant and related assertions: that congregational schools filled the gap in the provision of education in the crucial years from 1815 to 1850, and that those schools were far more often for girls than for boys. Curtis’s work here echoes other recent work showing that demand for education among the populace preceded the government’s willingness to provide and pay for it (see, e.g., Reed-Danahay). What she adds here is the realization that it was the lack of a concomitant increase in communal funding for education, alongside the increased demand, that led teaching congregations to fill the gap. This, more than anything, supports her larger conclusion that religious education played a fundamental role in the creation of modern France, particularly if we remember Antoine Prost’s assertion that the years before the Third Republic

constituted the fundamental period of growth of primary education in France (though Prost meant more the Second Empire than the July Monarchy).<sup>[5]</sup> Moreover, this provision of funding split along gender lines, as the communes preferred to give to their contributions, small as they were, to boys' education. This produced a remarkable predominance of congregational schools in girls' education. Curtis shows that in the department of the Loire, in particular, an astonishing 82 to 93 percent of girls' elementary education was provided in congregational schools (p. 25). The national figure, while much less, was still between 45 and 60 percent. Thus, Curtis has shown why the religious schools were indeed part of the early and fundamental growth of primary education in nineteenth-century France, particularly for girls. In order to accurately evaluate the importance of the congregational schools, however, one must distinguish between private religious schools and public religious schools, a distinction which Curtis does not address here. I will return to this question shortly.

Chapter two examines the supply of congregational teachers in the same period up to 1870. With the precipitous growth of congregational education in the nineteenth century there naturally arose a need for teachers. Curtis finds that the congregations generally drew from their own schools in their own region. Trained in the central novitiates, the emphasis was on their religious duties, with a necessary minimum of academic knowledge and pedagogy. Curtis sees the novitiate as a kind of congregational normal school, parallel to the limited preparation of the secular primary teacher. Certainly before the 1880s the list of subjects they were taught was virtually identical. According to Curtis, the main difference between secular and religious teacher training was the existence of a second and third year in the normal schools, whereas the congregational teachers generally went into the classroom after one year of training. When it came to taking positions, however, congregational teachers dominated in rural schools because the congregations trained more of them, faster, and they fit better in those schools and communities than the more ambitious normal school graduates. Beginning with the Second Empire, however, an important distinction arose: the only certification required for congregational teachers was the "letter of obedience," a document which stressed religious conviction and obedience more than pedagogical knowledge or aptitude, while lay teachers had to pass the test for the *brevet de capacité*, a test of basic knowledge and pedagogy (though a male religious teacher who was the head of a school had to possess the *brevet*). Though some went on to receive it, the lack of a *brevet* among congregational teachers became the focus of attacks on the quality of religious teachers by the secularizers of the Third Republic. This so-called "credentials debate" remains significant for its role in the arguments for secularization after 1870. Curtis believes it was "somewhat of a red herring" (p. 59), for the emphasis on the *brevet* revealed more about the attitudes of particular congregations towards certification than about the quality of the teachers they trained. And yet, in my view, even if the issue was never simply one of quality of teaching, the state's need to control education and its content, and thus the training and certification of teachers, ultimately helped the secularizers to push congregational teachers out of education altogether; it also represents a fundamental difference between religious and secular, and public and private education, which would take on a much greater significance after 1870, and thus is important for assessing the influence of religious education in general.

Chapter three, "Esprit de Corps: Corporate Identity and Community Spirit," examines how the organization of teaching orders in the period up to 1870 helped them to succeed in teaching. Curtis argues that the centralized and hierarchical nature of the congregations suited them to the task of recruiting, training and providing teachers, and that the "esprit de corps" of the congregations provided a "sense of professional identity" which helped them bear the relative poverty, isolation, and demanding work of the mid-nineteenth century primary teacher better than their secular counterparts, particularly for women teachers. She describes well the difficulties of both rural and urban teachers, but I find her suggestion that the congregations provided a kind of moral and professional support unavailable to lay teachers lacking in supporting evidence. Indeed, her evidence suggests to me more similarities than differences in the circumstances of lay and congregational teachers. Chapter four studies the pedagogy of the catholic schools. Curtis emphasizes the gradual evolution of teaching in the congregational schools from an emphasis on a very basic education in reading, writing, and mathematics, stressing

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prayer, the catechism, and Bible stories (*histoire sainte*), to the development of a more complex and more regulated pedagogy by the 1860s and 1870s. This more expanded curriculum could incorporate drawing, geography, French history, French, etc., in spite of a general mistrust (shared by secular educators, I would note) of an over-educated peasant or worker. What is most striking to me here is the virtually identical nature of the pedagogy and curriculum of the catholic and the secular schools, down to the use of “object lessons,” or *leçons de choses*. Curtis recognizes the similarities, and concludes that it was the primacy of religious instruction that differentiated congregational from secular schools before the Third Republic’s secularizing. Yet to one who has studied the pedagogy of the public schools, the very language of the pedagogy of catholic education sounds remarkably familiar to those of the secular schools, including the exhortations to go beyond merely teaching by trying to “reach the soul and the heart” of students.[6] Perhaps this is not so surprising, given the many points at which public and religious education coincide. However, Curtis fails to note here, as in each chapter in the first half of her study, the overlap among the categories of public, private, and religious schooling up until the Ferry Laws. Thus, it was possible to have a private religious school or a public religious school, and a private as well as a public secular school. To discuss questions of religious pedagogy before 1870 by setting up a binary opposition of religious and public schooling is thus to oversimplify a very complex question. Though these certainly became the opposing categories which mattered in later decades, the public schools themselves could be religious in nature before Ferry. The similarity in religious and secular instruction, whether in morality or in “object lessons,” in the hostility to the English “mutual” method of teaching versus the simultaneous method, in the different gender roles taught to boys and girls (as Linda Clark long ago noted), or even in the core values to be imparted by education and the means to inculcate them, seems less jarring in this light. However, this does not completely undermine the striking conclusion which Curtis draws in this chapter, that the congregations laid the underpinnings of the pedagogy of the modern French nation-state. Even if I cannot completely agree with handing the congregations so much responsibility for these developments, in light of Curtis’s research we should at the very least increase the emphasis on their contribution. However, to understand the role of religious education in nineteenth-century France before 1870, and to be able to apportion responsibilities and contributions, one must tease out with more subtlety the complexly interwoven stories of public secular and public religious education, and public and private religious education in the period.

Part II, “Catholic Schooling on the Defensive,” covers the years from 1870 to 1905 in three chapters dealing with different aspects of the early years of the Third Republic. These chapters tell the story of adaptation to the dramatic changes of the Ferry and Goblet laws of 1881 to 1886 which made public education secular and removed all congregational teachers from the public schools, and the even more difficult years after the turn of the century when many congregations were outlawed outright. For France as a whole this was a controversial process and the progress of real change in the schools took many years to implement.[7] Curtis shows that a slow pace of implementation was indeed the case in the diocese of Lyon, and explores three issues in detail in three successive chapters: the recruitment and certification of teachers; the creation of new private catholic schools; and catholic responses to the forced closings of congregational schools and prohibition of teaching orders. Chapter five concerns the adaptation of the congregational schools to the requirement, introduced in 1881, that every public school teacher hold the *brevet de capacité*, and the resulting problems in recruiting religious teachers. The problems were significant: just before the law was passed, fifty-eight percent of teaching brothers and eighty-six percent of teaching sisters in the diocese did not hold the *brevet* (p. 109). The response involved creating the equivalent of congregational “*écoles normales*,” earlier recruitment, and, of course, providing training to help congregational teachers pass the exam for the *brevet*. Interestingly, this provoked complaints within the congregations that the younger congregational teachers were too secularized. The Ferry Law of 1882 should have been the *coup de grâce* to public religious education, as it completely secularized the curriculum. But in reality even secularization of the curriculum proceeded slowly. Even after the 1886 Goblet law chased the congregational teachers from the public schools, the law itself mandated five years to banish male religious teachers, with no set deadline for women congregationalists. As Curtis notes, secularization of public schools began as early as 1870-1871,

particularly in urban areas. After 1886 the pace picked up, but a lack of trained secular teachers, especially female secular teachers, and a lack of public funds to build or furnish new secular schools, hampered the effort. Moreover, many parents remained attached to their religious schools. In the end, the issue could pit parents against municipal councils, or municipal councils against prefects, particularly as the law was vague for the timing of secularizing girls' schools. Nevertheless, with an eye to the future, the church began a new system of private catholic schools, to protect the integrity of catholic education and the influence of the church in the country.

Chapter six studies the creation of that distinct Catholic system of schooling after Ferry. The challenges inherent in this effort were substantial, and fundamentally financial: lack of public funds; increased costs for training; and a new congregational property tax. Curtis describes the changes to the catholic schools which resulted from their removal from public education and their need to compete with the secular public schools: new conflicts between congregations and the dioceses in which they operated schools, particularly over after-school child care and school inspection; additions to the curriculum; and new competitions and examinations for students. Of course, religious instruction continued to be a fundamental concern of the congregational schools, but they were increasingly shaped by competition with the public schools and the need to attract funds, teachers, and students. Perhaps the most telling development was the often unwanted (from the congregations' perspective) dependence upon the hierarchy of the diocese and lay groups for finances and support in the post-1882 period, which would ultimately weaken the congregations' monopolistic control over religious schools. Beginning with this chapter, Curtis refers to the religious schools as *écoles libres*, or private schools, to distinguish them from public congregational schools. In her view, adapting to survive after the Ferry Laws created a system of religious education more unified and standardized, more "Catholic," than "congregational," and more like the secular public one than ever before. It would be ironic indeed if it were the very separation from the public system of education that rendered the congregational schools more like the secular public ones. However, highlighting the public-private distinction only after 1882 once again minimizes the significant mutual influences that resulted from the presence of large numbers of religious schools in the public system before 1882. Moreover, the standardization of post-Ferry private religious education seems to me to undercut Curtis's own argument for the influence of the congregational schools on France's modern educational system. It is, in my view, the standardization and regulation of all aspects of education that most characterizes the achievements and legacy of the Third Republic reforms, and I don't believe they can be attributed to the influence of the congregational schools.

Chapter seven examines the most difficult period for the congregational schools following the law of 1901 which established stringent regulation of associations in France, including all religious congregations, and the 1904 law which directly prohibited religious congregations from teaching. The choices facing the congregations were few: find lay teachers for the congregational schools, or close them. 1902 saw a wave of school closures, as the government led by Emile Combes eagerly pursued "unauthorized" congregations, leaving them illegal and clandestine, seizing their property, and forcing their schools to close. Curtis shows the extent of resistance to these closings, including protests, particularly by women, and dissimulation by priests and nuns who "left" their orders so as to be able to continue teaching, though without giving up their faith, operating as "clandestine nuns and monks." This was not unknown to the leaders of the congregations, who kept the records of secularized teachers separate from those who had truly left the orders, and often moved them to areas where they were not known to the local population, which helped them to disguise their views. Moreover, in yet another twist in the evolution of the religious schools, many were closed in 1902 to 1905, only to re-open in 1906 as "private lay schools." But the country and the context had changed: the role of the local curé and diocesan hierarchy; lay interest groups; and the influence of lay Catholic teachers had diminished the congregations' control.

The secularizing laws of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries effectively ended the religious influence in public education, and even the congregations' control over catholic education in France. As

Curtis's fine study demonstrates, these late-nineteenth century losses in the battle with state-sponsored secular education have rendered it too easy to remove religious education from the story of the creation of modern French education. I believe that Curtis may somewhat overstate the influence of religious education on secular education, in part because she focuses on such a deeply catholic region. But her work goes a long way in explaining the very large role of catholic teaching orders in the education of women in nineteenth-century France. Moreover, Curtis returns catholic education to its rightful and more prominent place in the development of primary education in France, and in the process greatly deepens our knowledge of the classrooms, schools, and teachers of the diocese of Lyon in the nineteenth century.

## NOTES

[1] Sharif Gemie, *Women and Schooling in France, 1815-1914: Gender, Authority, and Identity in the Female Schooling Sector* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1995); Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Education and Identity in Rural France: The Politics of Schooling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Stephen Harp, *Learning to be Loyal: Primary Schooling as Nation Building in Alsace and Lorraine, 1850-1940* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998); Anne Quartararo, *Women Teachers and Popular Education in Nineteenth-century France* (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 1995); and Raymond Grew and Patrick Harrigan, *School, State, and Society: the Growth of Elementary Schooling in Nineteenth-century France: a Quantitative Analysis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991).

[2] Yves Déloye, *Ecole et citoyenneté: l'individualisme républicain de Jules Ferry à Vichy: controverses* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1994); Mona Ozouf, *L'école, l'Eglise et la République, 1870-1914* (Paris: Editions de Cana, 1982); Pierre Chevallier, *La séparation de l'Eglise et de l'Ecole: Jules Ferry et Léon XIII* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1981). And see also articles in Theodore Zeldin, ed., *Conflicts in French Society: Education and Morals in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970).

[3] Robert Gildea, *Education in Provincial France, 1800-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Jean Peneff, *Ecoles publiques, écoles privées dans l'Ouest, 1880-1950* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987).

[4] Pierre Zind, *L'enseignement religieux dans l'instruction primaire publique en France de 1850 à 1873* (Lyon: Centre d'Histoire du Catholicisme, 1971); Marcel Launay, *L'église et l'école en France, XIXe - XXe siècles* (Paris: Desclée, 1988).

[5] Antoine Prost, *Histoire de l'enseignement en France, 1800-1967* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1968).

[6] See Barry H. Bergen, "Molding Citizens: Ideology, Class and Primary Education in Nineteenth-Century France," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1987, esp. 231-250.

[7] Ibid., esp. pp. 279-403.

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