
H-France Review Vol. 6 (August 2006), No. 94

Caroline Ford, *Divided Houses: Religion and Gender in Modern France*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005. xi + 170 pp. Bibliography and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8014-4367-9.

Review by Carol E. Harrison, University of South Carolina.

Historians have long been familiar with the anticlerical argument that French women, because of their persistent dedication to the Catholic Church, posed a threat to the republic. Jules Michelet's 1845 warning that "[o]ur wives, our daughters, are raised and ruled *by our enemies*" resonated well into the twentieth century.[1] Caroline Ford takes apart this cliché to argue that the French idea of *laïcité* emerged from a nineteenth-century gendered arrangement of political and familial power. *Divided Houses* unravels the tangled connections between gender and the secular ideal primarily through a series of microhistories, episodes in which female religiosity confronted male ambitions to establish a secular social and political order. Her book thus implicitly seeks to confront the "Catholic woman" of republican anxieties with the experiences of Catholic women who lived and practiced their faith during the nineteenth century.

Divided Houses opens with an introduction laying out Ford's premises about the relationship between *laïcité* and the "feminization of Catholicism" in nineteenth-century France. A feminized Church, Ford contends, was at the center both of debates about the civil status of women and of France's insistently secular republicanism. *La foi laïque* owed as much to the conflicts of private life as to philosophical and scientific materialism; the "intellectual divorce" between believing women and secular men raised male concerns about their authority as fathers, husbands, and citizens (p. 7). The image of the Catholic woman as republicanism's other emerged during the Revolution; in Jacobin discourse she represented both the fanaticism and the ultimate insignificance of counter-revolution. Chapter one synthesizes recent work on religion and Revolution to trace the emergence of the Catholic *dévote*, a figure who allowed revolutionaries to limit and then dismiss challenges to the new political order. This revolutionary association between women, unreasoning faith, and hysterical counter-revolution set the stage for the nineteenth century's projection of gender dichotomy on to questions of politics and religion.

At the heart of the book are four chapters, several of which have appeared in print before, which present aspects of the nineteenth-century confrontation between female religiosity and the secular institutions of the state. Three of the four are microhistories focusing on legal cases that saw devout Catholic women testing their rights in civil courts under the Restoration, the July Monarchy, and the Second Empire. The fourth focuses on devotion to Saint Philomena whose cult rose and fell in a brief period in the mid nineteenth century.

Court cases and the pamphlet literature they produced form the basis of the microhistories that examine the intersection between women's rights and their religiosity. Chapter two, on the "seduction" of Emily Loveday, sets a young woman's religious freedom (to convert to Catholicism) against her Protestant father's right to determine his daughter's future and his family's religious identity. Leading political figures of the Restoration era engaged in the debate, taking unexpected and inconsistent sides. Liberals' distrust of Catholic women overcame their commitment to individual liberty as they supported the father's right to coerce his daughter. Conservative Catholics abandoned their support for patriarchal authority in order to justify Emily Loveday's right to follow her conscience.

The following chapter takes on the case of Jeanne-Françoise Le Monnier, who sued her religious order for illegally incarcerating her in the convent and in an insane asylum. Here Ford focuses on Le Monnier's lawyer's use of the melodramatic trope of forced clausturation to argue both that his client had been unjustifiably imprisoned and that she should be allowed to return to her order. Rejecting the notion that a nun abandoned her civil personality, he argued that entry into a religious order was a contract and that the Saint Sacrament of Bayeux remained bound to uphold its side of the contract with Le Monnier. The final chapter explores the struggles of Mme de Guerry/Sister Esther to reclaim the substantial dowry she had brought to the convent at Picpus in order to use the funds to establish a new religious order. As ecclesiastical negotiations over the dowry stagnated, Guerry took her demands to civil court, where her lawyer, Emile Ollivier, argued that canon law could not trump the inalienability of property in civil law, and that Mme de Guerry's property remained her own.

Chapter four shifts away from questions of women's rights to examine the nature of female religiosity, focusing on the cult of Saint Philomena. A saint whose history was fabricated from archaeological remains found in the Roman catacombs and the accounts of a series of visionaries, Philomena received official sanction in 1837, gained a dramatic following in France in the 1840s and 1850s, yet virtually disappeared from the French landscape by 1890. The story of Philomena, an adolescent girl who chose martyrdom over rape, resonated widely in mid-nineteenth-century France. As an attempt to include a discussion of women's religious experience in a book that is overwhelmingly about secular representations of female religiosity, however, the chapter falls short.

Writing about Philomena's cult, Ford argues that "her popular appeal, particularly among women, had much to do with the nature of her martyrdom and her alleged miraculous healings" (p. 97). She rightly warns, however, that such an analysis "cannot simply be reduced to psychological problems among its adherents or to the Church's changed social constituency in nineteenth-century France" (p. 99). Although Ford maintains that it is important to balance the "social, ecclesiastical, and political context of postrevolutionary France" with the "'lived religion' experienced by men and...women," (p. 100) she does not really achieve this goal. Her discussion of Philomena is all context: in particular, clerical encouragement of popular religious practices that their eighteenth-century predecessors would have labeled "superstition" and growing Ultramontanism with its interest in relics with Roman connections. Ford has much less to say about devotion to Philomena as "lived religion." Her discussion of the nineteenth-century's fascination with girl-saints martyred as they resisted sexual aggression is suggestive, and Ford usefully calls our attention to the proliferation of narratives of sexual danger in novels and melodramas of the period and in the "hagiography" of the French Revolution's female martyrs. Nowhere, however, do we learn what dedication to Saint Philomena meant to any of her followers or why some women found devotion to Philomena more meaningful than the commemoration of revolutionary heroines or the pleasures of boulevard theater.

The same silence on the part of religious women characterizes the other chapters of the book; Ford relies on lawyers' arguments, not women's accounts of their religious faith. By articulating the male anxieties about female religiosity that fueled anticlericalism, *Divided Houses* raises many questions about the role of Catholicism in women's lives and women's interpretations of republican anticlericalism. The Loveday affair, for instance, produced a corpus of twenty pamphlets signed by its principal actors and clearly composed with the assistance of lawyers; these pamphlets mapped out the debate in terms of individual liberty vs. the dutiful submission of daughters. If Emily Loveday had other terms with which to tell her story, we do not learn what they were. Similarly, the chapter on Jeanne-Françoise Le Monnier's suit against her religious order focuses on her lawyer's *mémoire judiciaire*. Ford emphasizes the role of storytelling in legal process, but an intertextual approach that reads the *mémoire* in dialogue with other tales of forced clausturation leaves us with a major lacuna at the point where Le Monnier's brief diverged from its narrative predecessors: Le Monnier wanted (or at least claimed to want) to be readmitted to her convent. Le Monnier and the sisters of the Saint Sacrament probably did not

understand vocation exclusively in terms of civil contract, but the legal *mémoire* said nothing about other interpretations of the obligations of women religious. Finally, Emile Ollivier shaped Mme de Guerry's case as an issue over individual property rights and the status of the Picpus convent as an unauthorized association. Ford does not tell us whether Mme de Guerry and the Picpus sisters understood the religious life and its claims on property differently. All of these questions have a real bearing on our understanding of women's lives and of women's role in shaping both French Catholicism and French republicanism.

Divided Houses is strongest as an account of the role that representations of devout women played in the elaboration of French politics, and it makes an important contribution to elucidating the gendered underpinnings of *laïcité*. We learn much less about the other side of the divide—the meaning of Catholic faith and practice for devout women and their response to the strongly misogynist strain in republican *laïcité*. If we follow Ford's lead and imagine French secularism as emerging from conflicts in private life, then we need to understand the side of the debate that spoke for female devotion and conscience. In the repeated encounters between husbands and wives and fathers and daughters, what alternative, female, Catholic accounts of the relationship between individual liberty, religious belief, national identity, and civil status emerged? Sources, often largely untapped, do exist for exploring how women understood their own piety and the personal and social roles they assigned to their church. Congregational archives and women's devotional writings, in particular, are useful places to begin the task of understanding the motives of the female protagonists of Ford's microhistories or the meanings that Philomena's followers read into the saint's life. Approaching the question of female religiosity through different sources will further untangle the at least partly fictional Catholic woman of the anticlerical imagination from France's many practicing Catholic women.

NOTES

[1] Jules Michelet, *Du Prêtre, de la femme, de la famille*, 4th ed. (Paris: Comptoir des Imprimeurs-unis, 1845), p. 44.

Carol E. Harrison
University of South Carolina
ceharris@gwm.sc.edu

Copyright © 2006 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172