

H-France Review Vol. 8 (June 2008), No. 86

Raymond Jonas, *The Tragic Tale of Claire Ferchaud & the Great War*. Berkley and London: University of California Press, 2005. xiv +217 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-520-24297-1; \$21.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-520-24299-8

Review by Margaret H. Darrow, Dartmouth College.

This slim volume is a coda to Raymond Jonas's magisterial study, *France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart* (University of California Press, 2000). That book relates the campaign to consecrate France to the Sacred Heart of Jesus from the original vision of Marguerite-Marie Alacoque in the seventeenth century through the French Revolution and the fraught religious politics of the nineteenth century, culminating with the erection of the basilica of the Sacred Heart on the summit of Montmartre at the turn of the century. *The Tragic Tale of Claire Ferchaud* takes the story through the First World War; in one year, from the spring of 1917 to the spring of 1918, Claire Ferchaud, a twenty-one year old peasant woman, embodied this cause.

Claire came from the Vendée, the heart of Sacred Heart country. From early childhood, she had had intimate visions of Jesus, Mary and other saints who conversed with her and with each other in her own private spiritual world. At first their conversations concerned only herself; in her first encounter with him, Jesus warned her to obey her mother. Under the pressure of the war, however, her visions reached out with their messages to all of France and even to France's allies.

Central to Claire's visions was the Sacred Heart, an image and devotion that cradled her childhood. Her parish church was adorned with a stained-glass window of Marguerite-Marie Alacoque and her vision; her education, such as it was, was entrusted to the Sisters of the Sacred Heart. But in addition to its prevalence in local piety, the Sacred Heart was uniquely suited to deliver a message to wartime France. Marguerite-Marie Alacoque's original visions spoke of a France consecrated to the Sacred Heart that would be victorious. In Claire's revisions, if France affixed the image of the Sacred Heart to the national flag and to the flags of all the allies, Christ would deliver the victory that, in 1917, seemed so desperately far beyond from the capacities of France's mortal armies.

On the other hand, the Sacred Heart was a singularly ill-suited messenger to the *Union sacrée*. Its image was not simply pro-Catholic, it was anti-republican. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Sacred Heart had been the badge of the counter-revolution, a rejection of egalitarianism, liberalism and democracy. And the war did not significantly change this identity. In the spring of 1915, the French episcopate attempted to consecrate every French parish to the Sacred Heart, an effort of grass-roots national consecration. As part of the ceremony, each parish priest was to read out a list of the nation's sins that had wounded Christ's heart and for which France wished to atone, such as civil marriage, secular education and the separation of Church and state. In essence, France was to repent of the Republic. Claire's own visions became increasingly anti-Republican (and fabulous) in the spring of 1917, predicting a betrayal of France plotted by Freemasons in the high ranks of the government.

Not surprisingly, the government moved quickly to quash this campaign, using the instruments of wartime censorship to block publications and seize mailings. The Church's reaction was initially ambivalent both toward the Sacred Heart agitation as a whole and especially toward Claire. For example, the plan to dedicate France to the Sacred Heart parish by parish does not seem to have had the

full support of all the bishops. The important bishopric of Lyon preferred family consecrations (p. 106). The campaign to add the Sacred Heart badge to the flag raised more objections. As Cardinal Billot mused, what if France put the Sacred Heart on its flag and Germany did the same? After all, there were many German Catholics. “‘Then we would have this Heart,’ Billot noted, ‘leading French to slaughter Germans and Germans to slaughter French’” (p. 139). And although Claire found strong support in her home territory, when she went to Paris in February of 1917, she encountered skepticism and opposition from the Catholic hierarchy. Archbishop Amette doubted both the authenticity of her visions and the political wisdom of her mission. In 1918, the Vatican intervened, calling off all the Sacred Heart campaigns and silencing Claire. Two years later, it ruled against her claims and banned her cult.

Jonas uses Claire Ferchaud’s brief and bizarre story to explore the ways in which French Catholics understood the First World War, their conceptions of their role in the war and the war’s role in France’s future. Some Catholics saw in the war a divinely-ordained opportunity to reconvert France, and to remasculinize the faith. In some of the book’s most interesting chapters, Jonas describes the Catholic interpretation of the “miracle of the Marne” and the work of volunteer military chaplains and women’s groups to reconvert France via the conversion of the army. As he makes abundantly clear, Claire’s mission did not come out of the blue. The campaign to consecrate France to the Sacred Heart and the efforts to place the Sacred Heart on the flag were already in full swing prior to her visions. Even the paranoia of an anti-Christian government betraying France pre-existed her emergence upon the scene. What she contributed was her visions and her body, that of a young woman, a modern Joan of Arc or St. Geneviève, to personify the cause.

Both her visions and her body were problematic gifts. Claire’s visions seem to have been more or less continual and Jonas does not describe many of them, but some of the ones we do hear about are disturbing: Jesus’s heart with a gaping vulva-shaped wound (p. 45); the mass overwhelmed in a torrent of blood (p. 37). Claire’s society had a theory and language by which to understand such phenomena, particularly when experienced by a woman, the pathology of hysteria. No such theory had existed at the time of Marguerite-Marie Alacoque or even of Bernadette Soubirous, but by 1917, even the Church was influenced by Charcot’s work (pp. 145-150). So in 1917, was the cause of the Sacred Heart helped or hindered by a young woman with bloody visions?

Disappointingly, for both the cause and for Jonas’s study of it, Claire was, and is, not sufficiently compelling to carry the story. Jonas characterizes her as skillful, stubborn and smart and would have her be an agent, using the forces at play in her time to forge her own mission (p. 2). But most of the time, the dynamic seems just the opposite, that is, her surroundings dictated her message. Her visions were remarkably responsive to circumstances, adding or revising instructions as conditions, or Claire’s understanding of them, changed. For example, after initially presenting Claire with the romantic school-girlish mission of becoming a modern Joan of Arc, leading the French army, they reneged and assigned her the more politic mission of appealing to Poincaré. Claire’s visions adopted her handlers’ causes more often than they shaped them. She is a vacuum at the center of the story, absorbing its energy rather than driving it.

What is it that Claire actually contributed to the wartime Catholic cause? Jonas claims that “her activism was unrelenting” (page 128) but we see very little of it. She wrote three letters to Poincaré, had one meeting with him, and wrote to fifteen French generals. Jonas claims that she initiated the petition drive of the spring and summer of 1917 that called upon the government to consecrate France to the Sacred Heart. According to her own account, she first broached this idea to Poincaré and one of her followers later took it to Amette. But our only evidence of this is her own *Notes autobiographiques*, published in 1974, two years after Claire’s death. This is the main, often the only source, for much of her story. What is this account? When was it written and why? Were the notes made at the time or do they comprise the memoirs of an old woman looking back to make sense of her life? Even if the idea of the petition drive was hers—doubtful given the lack of originality in the rest of her mission—what role

did she actually play in the campaign? The campaign got underway in May, with publicity in *La Croix* and a secretariat in Paris; by this time, Claire had been back in the Vendée for some time.

Claire's "tragic tale" and the story of the Sacred Heart cult came together for a brief period and of the two, the second is much more interesting than the first, but it is the first that Jonas has chosen to frame his study, a choice that proves problematic. Claire did not initiate the Sacred Heart campaigns during the war, she merely joined them and perhaps revitalized them at the war's lowest point. To explain these initiatives, Jonas must pull away from Claire's story. Several chapters barely mention her and the chronology swerves back and forth from the "miracle of the Marne" in 1914, to Claire's emergence on the national scene in 1917, to the consecration campaign of 1915. When the story of Claire and the Sacred Heart separate in 1918, the book sticks with Claire, although her life, as Jonas describes it, "collapsed into obscurity again" (p. 154). But what of the Sacred Heart? Did it sink into obscurity with her? Or does Jonas have another installment in view?

Wedding the Sacred Heart to Claire's story leaves a number of interesting issues inadequately explored. One is the significance of the cult's acceptance of the tricolor flag. The flag to which devotees of the Sacred Heart had wanted to affix their badge was the white flag of the Bourbons. According to Jonas, even after the death of the Comte de Chambord in 1883, backers of the cult refused to accept the Republic.<sup>[1]</sup> Yet in 1917 they campaigned to add their emblem to the Republic's flag. Had the restoration of the monarchy dropped out of the cult's program? Or had the tricolor's partisan significance eroded? After thirty years of national public education and under the crisis of the German invasion, had it become the symbol of France rather than of the Republic? The evidence here is ambiguous. On the one hand, the petition campaign implies, as one of its supporters acknowledged, acceptance of popular sovereignty (p. 127). On the other hand, Annette Becker points out that in her letters to Poincaré, Claire never referred to the Republic.<sup>[2]</sup> She apparently conceived of him as a kind of monarch, "the head of everything" (p. 81) who could make French law with the stroke of a pen.

Gender is another issue that deserved more systematic exploration. It emerges in the work of the volunteer army chaplains who were delighted to reach a male audience for the first time and dreamed of a post-war remasculinized Catholic Church. It also surfaces in the Church's concern that hysteria might explain female visionaries. I wish Jonas had undertaken a sustained gender analysis of these crosscurrents. We might understand better the Church's ambivalence toward Claire's mission and its ultimate rejection of her.

Despite its weaknesses, the book considerably illuminates French Catholics' beliefs and behaviors during the First World War. This is a topic that studies of the war generally bracket under the heading of the *Union sacrée* and then ignore. Yet, except in the patriotism that they shared with virtually all French citizens, Catholics reacted diversely to the crisis of the war. Although Jonas focuses on the reactionary wing of the Church, he points out that the Sacred Heart agitators did not speak for all French Catholics. For example, the bishop of Périgueux objected to the effort to put the Sacred Heart on the national flag because he recognized the effect this would have on France's non-Catholics (p. 138). Nonetheless Jonas shows that Catholic understanding of the *Union sacrée* was often far different from that of republicans and the war, rather from facilitating a rapprochement of Church and Republic, proved a fertile terrain for their misunderstandings to flourish. If conservative Catholics did come to accept the Republic during the war, it was via a kind of Catholic Jacobism, a Catholic general will that would impose itself upon France's future. Thus Catholic *ralliement*, to the extent that it occurred, did not necessarily bolster the parliamentary regime or a commitment to the Rights of Man; on the contrary, it could provide foot soldiers for Vichy.

## NOTES

[1] Raymond Jonas, *France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart; An epic tale for modern times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 235.

[2] Annette Becker, *La Guerre et la foi; De la mort à la mémoire 1914-1930*. (Paris: Armand Colin, 1994), p. 83.

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