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Philippe Boutry and André Encrevé, eds., *Vers la liberté religieuse: La séparation des Eglises et de l'Etat. Actes du colloque organisé à Créteil les 4 et 5 février 2005 par l'Institut Jean-Baptiste Say de l'Université Paris XII-Val-de-Marne*. Bordeaux: Editions Bière, 2006. 346 pp. 29€. ISBN 2-85276-090-8.

Review by Julian Wright, Durham University.

The law of the 9 of December 1905, which established the separation of church and state in France, unpicked the complex relationship between the Roman Catholic Church, Protestant churches and Jewish synagogues and the State; but it is for its impact on relationships between the Roman Catholic community and the Republic that it has usually been considered a foundation stone of the modern French Republic. Its genesis, through the tortured period of the Combes ministry, when an impassioned anti-clericalism took on an increasingly intransigent Roman Catholic hierarchy, has itself become part of the law's history. Indeed, commentators in 2005 frequently remarked on the fact that in many of the centenary commemorations, rather more was made of Emile Combes, spiritual director of the cult of *laïcisme*, than Aristide Briand, whose quiet perambulations between the different implicated parties actually produced the law, several months after Combes had given up hope and left office. Clearly, the rigorous scientific analyses of professional history need to be given greater prominence in the way such episodes are dealt with in the wider public debate. Too often, commentators in the press and the political arena are obliged to simplify as they assess the importance of the "moment of laicisation." It is all the more satisfying, then, that such a well-organized and detailed volume should now be available, and even if it is a little hard to get hold of for some scholars, it would certainly help if it were put on the reading list for the *agrégation* and other such syllabi in France.

As the volume unfolds, we are increasingly confronted with the editors' central contention, that this crucial foundation law for modern France was principally a law of liberty. In many ways, the law could thus be seen to have been conceived and implemented in a spirit which contradicted the prevailing current, in which diplomatic relations had broken off between Paris and the Vatican, and in which the assessment of property held by the churches would provoke violent conflict in the provinces. As the editors explain it, the law provided an opportunity for Christians, Jews and agnostics to work together to put in place a veritable religious freedom in France (p. 17). From the moment in 1906 when Pius X consecrated fourteen new bishops, without reference to the French government, French Catholicism was provided with the means to reconceptualise its mission in France, to build new churches and to engage in society on its own terms.

The strength of this volume is that the organizers of the colloquium perceived the importance of opening up a number of different approaches to the issue of Separation, and have given a place to many new and emerging fields of enquiry. On one level, we are provided with insights into how religious legislation affected not only Roman Catholics, but also Protestants and Jews in France. The very fact of having such studies present in the volume is a timely reminder that the legislation was not all about the "revenge" of an anti-clerical Republic over its intransigent enemies. Republican leaders were learning about the importance of legislating for the whole of France; this law was about devising appropriate legal relationships between the State and the practising believer, after a century in which the existing *concordataire* regime (designed by Napoleon I) had in fact privileged Catholics over Protestants.

Another way in which this volume represents a significant and important advance is in the chapters that

examine the practicalities of the relationship between Church and State in the nineteenth century, and in which the cost to both sides of the process of Separation is duly weighed. Some complex financial calculations concerning the financial implications of the *concordataire* regime and the subsequent cost of the Separation law have been attempted by Jean-Pierre Moisset and Béatrice Touchelay. The very complexity of their task emphasizes a difficult but important element in this argument. Many of the noisiest aspects of public debate about Separation had in fact been concluded long before the law was passed. Because public debate in the parliament and in the press is often the most direct “way in” for students of a theme such as this, it is those noisier elements that have perhaps dominated historical research in the past. Few historians have noticed, for example, that the cost of implementing the policy of Separation has never been the subject of an enquiry by a historian, nor indeed by contemporary politicians or civil servants (p. 233). The conclusion that must be drawn from this is that the problem of Separation is one which has occupied historians in the realm of political debate and ideas rather than those who study financial practicalities.

Political ideas and debates do figure prominently here, however, and rightly so. Jacqueline Lalouette offers some fresh reading of the anti-clerical newspaper *L’Action*, whose anti-clerical editor, Henry Bérenger would later become a strong supporter of Aristide Briand’s policy of domestic *apaisement* in 1909-10.[1] Rémi Fabre, the author of an excellent recent study of Francis de Pressensé, (the Protestant republican and president of the Ligue des Droits de l’Homme), uses his subtle knowledge of the diverse fractions of French socialism to unpack the complex way in which the left reacted, first, to the debate about Separation, and second, to its implementation.[2] One of the most fascinating details in this story concerns the process by which three moderate socialists, Briand, Jaurès and Pressensé, moved from having been strong supporters of the *combiste* attack on the congregations to being much more “liberal” in 1905 when it came to the Separation law itself—and this at a time when Jaurès and Briand were drawing opposing conclusions from their involvement in such common enterprises, the first repudiating the second for his failure to see the point of a united socialist party. It is a narrative well told by Fabre.

An excellent counterpoint to the story of a moderate liberal law comes from Michel Rapoport’s examination of the Separation crisis as it was perceived in Great Britain. This analysis serves to underpin the fact that it was not at all evident, at the time, that the game was one of the opposing forces of anti-clericalism and clericalism, united in their mutual detestation. British commentators found a natural sympathy for the position of moderate Catholicism, imbued as many of them were with the memory of the great English social Catholic Cardinal Manning, and his own concept of how the Roman Church might adapt to the exigencies of modern society. In another fascinating piece analysing “foreign echoes,” Buket Turkmen examines the resonances which the French Separation policy created in the emergence of the Republic of Turkey: here, law, State, society and the education system all had important lessons to learn from the French experience.

The more precise problem of how the Roman Church would operate in the face of the hostility of leading French politicians is examined in detail in Gilles Ferragu’s account of the expulsion of Monseigneur Montagnini, who had been discretely appointed as the pope’s eyes and ears in Paris after the expulsion of the Nuncio in July 1904, the and the virulent commentaries that ensued on both sides; and by Jacques-Olivier Boudon, who is concerned with the way in which the French episcopate was divided by the crisis. The way in which the law would affect the liberal and evangelical wings of French Protestantism, themselves under great internal strain, is usefully discussed by Patrick Harismendy; and Jean Laloum, Rita Hermon-Belot and Philippe Landau examine how the experience of the Jewish community in France evolved from the point of view of the Jewish press, Jewish thought and the subsequent religious organization of Judaism.

The most important and most complex actor in this discussion is the French State—complex, because so often its description as “laic” dominates to the exclusion of other elements. In this case, as Philippe

Boutry concludes provocatively, the description has sometimes made us forget that, nowhere did the law in fact use the term “laic.” This legislation was, in its formulation and in its application, really an attempt to enshrine the principle of religious liberty within the State (p. 340). Such a point was not obvious at the time, nor was it obvious in the immediate aftermath, when the visceral struggle of “les deux France” grabbed the headlines and traced the outline of future political and historical commentary. And yet, by making the decision--the difficult and yet the historiographically responsible decision--to concentrate on the ways in which this episode marked a stage in the growth of liberty rather than the growth of secularism (closely allied though these two things are), the contributors to this volume have made a significant, profound and laudable statement about how French history needs to think of itself in the future. The battles and the polemics were not everything; and the law, the State, even the politicians and priests themselves reflected another France, one which sought to find the true meaning of liberty of conscience in the modern Republican State.

In spite of the continuing story that the French tell themselves about the growth of the secular Republic, propelled forward by trenchant anti-clericals such as Emile Combes, there is a more fundamental narrative that needs to be heard, which speaks less of noisy polemic and more of the actual workings out of legislative reform. What is badly needed, and what this volume provides, is a careful unpicking of the law of separation from the other laws and acts of the anti-clerical administration that preceded it. The story which emerges from this detailed scholarly enterprise is about negotiation, compromise and the adaptation of the workings of the State to allow the free development of religious conscience, rather than the imposition of a strident anti-clericalism. We should hope that the contemporary French Republic values this “founding moment” by referring more to the detailed scholarship which has produced this nuanced account.

## NOTES

[1] For this policy, see Marie-Georges Dèzes, “Participation et démocratie sociale: l’expérience Briand de 1909”, *Le mouvement social*, 87 (1974), pp. 109-36; Julian Wright, “Social Reform, State Reform and Aristide Briand’s Moment of Hope in France, 1909-10,” *French Historical Studies* 28 1 (Winter, 2005), pp. 31-68.

[2] Rémi Fabre, *Francis de Pressensé et la défense des Droits de l’Homme: un intellectuel au combat*, (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2004).

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