

---

H-France Review Vol. 16 (August 2016), No. 161

Sylvain Milbach, *Les Chaires Ennemies; L'Église et la liberté d'enseignement secondaire dans la France des notables (1830-1850)*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2015. 664 pp. Maps, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. €95,00 (cl). ISBN: 978-2-7453-2785-7.

Review by Patrick H. Hutton, University of Vermont.

Sylvain Milbach, maître de conférence en histoire contemporaine at the Université de Savoie, presents a panoramic study of the Catholic position on reforms in secondary education during the July Monarchy and the Second Republic. He tells the story in a way that expands upon larger issues of church/state relations over the course of the history of these regimes, and in his forecasting, beyond. He provides historical perspective on the larger goals of the Church in an era of ongoing cultural secularization, and on the political vision of leaders of the July Monarchy as they embarked on a search for a *juste milieu* that would maintain a precarious balance among the political and social forces of the day.

Milbach's first purpose is to dispel a myth, perpetuated in popular memory well into the twentieth century, that nineteenth-century France was a cultural battleground pitting Voltairian free-thinkers against tradition-bound clerics, as epitomized in the quarrel between schoolmaster and priest played out in villages throughout rural France. The project leads him into an investigation of the complexities of church/state relations in a country in which Catholicism was so deeply embedded in its popular culture. Coming to power in the wake of a popular uprising in 1830, yet insecure in their search for bearings in the years that followed, leaders of the new regime endeavored to find their way toward a middle ground that balanced continuity and change in all spheres of public life. *Liberté* as a precept was their watchword, and Catholic leaders in the politics of the day invoked that motto in public discourse to advance the cause of an ongoing role for the Church in educational reform. With the future of religious life in French culture in mind, they recognized that public policy on education was a crucial arena in which to fight for what autonomy the Church might hope to maintain within a culture drifting toward secularization.

For the July Monarchy, too—a regime struggling to find equilibrium amidst opposing forces of innovation vs. moral order—the future was an indeterminate horizon. Of moment, therefore, were policy decisions about the conditions under which the young were to be educated, particularly for those who would one day play roles of leadership in fashioning the regime's prospects: hence, the particular importance all parties attached to secondary education as a training ground for that elite.

It is here that Milbach centers his story. Catholic leaders, he explains, were determined to play a role in the preparation of Catholic youth for adult responsibilities, and so aspired to carve out a prominent place for religious institutions within any settlement on educational reform. In its early years, the July Monarchy was reputed to be mildly anticlerical, but its statesmen never challenged the cultural role the Church played in everyday life. Catholicism may no longer have been a state-sponsored religion, but in the preamble to the new regime's Charter of 1830, it was recognized as the religion professed by the

majority of the French people. The objective for Catholic leaders was to maintain their role in formulating educational policy, even though the Church no longer enjoyed a privileged legal status. It proved to be a challenging undertaking.

Milbach shows how the Catholic struggle for place in French education was no simple rearguard action, for a Catholic elite emerged as a formidable force in the politics of the July Monarchy, and one ambitious to redefine religious understanding in the modern world. It built strength in new ways, now that the alliance of throne and altar of the Restoration era had been severed. The Church was enjoying a renaissance in both intellectual life and popular religious devotions as notions about Christian humanism revitalized theological discourse. Popular piety was deepening, thanks to the renewal of the Church's social mission. From a political standpoint, the social role of the Church was greatly valued even among the most irreligious of rural notables as a necessary bulwark of the social order, especially at a time when radical protest in the cities roused their worries about subversive forces that might undermine the regime.

Milbach showcases the politicians who championed a place for the institutionalization of private Catholic school teaching within the framework of public education. He explores their efforts in three ways. The first concerns the context of Catholic initiatives. French education had been highly centralized. Schools at all levels, whether public or private, operated under the aegis of the University, an administrative entity established by Napoleon to oversee education in France in all of its varieties at all of its stages. Ecclesiastical leaders had enjoyed an integral role in this administration during the Restoration. The pressing question was whether they would be able to play a similar role in policy making about education in the new regime, and more specifically, whether ecclesiastical authorities would maintain a measure of autonomy in formulating the curricula for Catholic schools. They made their case for Catholic exceptionalism under the banner of "freedom of teaching." The question of the curricular needs for the training of the clergy, notably in the seminaries, was a particular stumbling block. Debate about the role the church would play in educational reform continued without resolution throughout the eighteen-year history of the regime and was settled only during the Second Republic. Milbach recounts the unfolding of Catholic perspectives in all of their varieties as its spokesmen entered the debate over the future of French education.

In the second path of his inquiry, Milbach delves into the pluralism of attitudes toward education among Catholic leaders in light of growing diversification within their ranks. There was no consensus among them about what church/state relations should be, or in their thinking about the place of religious institutions within a regime ambivalent about a public role for the Church. France of the July Monarchy was politically libertarian, yet socially conservative. Its politics reflected the influence of the rural notables of French society, more so than the leaders of the burgeoning cities. Milbach's key point is that attitudes about education among the Catholic elite were as scattered as were those among political leaders within the society at large. In an age in which the Church was experiencing revitalization and rethinking its social role, religious leaders took positions on education that spanned the spectrum of their possibilities. Some sought to reform the Church in line with a culture in rapid modernization. Others held out for a more tradition-bound approach. Some leaders advanced their position polemically in public forums, while others preferred back-channel diplomatic accommodation. The longstanding tensions between Gallicans and Ultramontanes over church jurisdiction played a role as well. The Holy See displayed a keen interest in religious issues in France, and meddled covertly.

Third, and in my view the most significant pathway in Milbach's inquiry, concerns his interpretation of the way in which laymen were beginning to rival clerics in speaking for the Church on issues of educational policy. In their journalism as in their parliamentary oratory, figures such as the comte Charles de Montalembert and Louis Veillot played outsized roles in advancing the Catholic position on educational reform, with newfound influence in light of the democratization of literacy among the faithful. They animated efforts to build a Catholic movement in French politics, and contributed to the

formation of a short-lived Catholic party. Here Milbach traces the gathering momentum to build such a party to play a role in the legislative assemblies alongside the secular ones. While its existence was fleeting, the Catholic party in the France of the 1840s merits comparison with the more enduring Center party in Germany later in the century, or with the Christian Democratic party in France in the post-World War II era, for which it might be considered a prototype. In the early to mid-nineteenth century, Milbach explains, there were too many vagaries within Catholic opinion to permit such a party to coalesce and endure. It withered away for want of a common front within its ranks. Guided by laymen with an assertive political agenda, the party tended to rouse the ire of conservative ecclesiastical leaders, who shied away from political confrontations and favored a less contentious pastoral role. There were too many factions within the Church, Milbach argues, and too many disagreements among them about the role the Church should play in politics for this venture to succeed. Ultimately, the clergy was unwilling to back lay political initiatives concerning educational policy, and the Catholic movement abandoned an active political role and settled for an accommodating cultural one devoted to finding a place for Church schools within the larger framework of French education.

Such was the settlement reached in the Falloux Law of 1850 during the short-lived Second Republic. The law decentralized the French educational system, permitted the Church to administer its own private schools alongside those of the state, and provided that the teaching clergy need not meet the qualifying standards set for their lay counterparts. The Law was a pragmatic compromise. As such, it worked, and settled the issue of educational policy until the turn of the twentieth century.

Milbach explicates the long campaign of the Catholic elite to advance a succession of proposals calculated to protect their stake in educational reform, introduced at short intervals through the later years of the July Monarchy's existence. He assiduously reconstructs the political debates in the Chambers and in the press about the first Villemain plan (1841), the second Villemain plan (1844), and the Salvandy plan (1847). Each in its way anticipated what were to become essential elements of the eventual settlement in the Falloux Law. Yet, the burden of his discussion concerns the way these initiatives were repeatedly thwarted, as none managed to garner sufficient clerical support for success, or for that matter the active support of the rank and file among the laity. The debates attending their campaigns were nonetheless passionate and commanded considerable public attention. In keeping with the regime's libertarian ideals, the politics of educational reform was at once vibrant and fluid, animating interest among all parties and the reading public as well. Yet, the series of proposals for educational reform unfurled by Catholic spokesmen with much fanfare were continually rebuffed, then recycled a few years later in slightly modified formulations only to suffer the same fate.

Such a scenario makes for a prolonged narrative on Milbach's part, as he recounts the overtures, discussions, and setbacks of the Catholic cause from the vantage points of its varied constituencies, based on his close reading of the parliamentary debates and the editorials of the leading Catholic newspapers, notably *l'Univers* and *le Correspondant*. The muddled inconclusiveness of the politics of educational reform, he suggests, exemplified in miniature the difficulties of attaining a *juste milieu* in the larger political sphere to which leaders of the July Monarchy aspired.

Along the way, Milbach profiles in high relief the leading players within the Catholic movement for educational reform, each singular and admirable in his own way: the romantic progressive religious thinker Félicité de Lamennais, the social activist Frédéric Ozanam, the master of diplomacy abbé Félix Dupanloup, the conservative firebrand Louis Veuillot, and most prominently, the versatile and talented comte Charles de Montalembert. In Milbach's rendering, Montalembert personified the cause of Catholic renewal under lay leadership, for he gave the Church an eloquent voice in the politics of a regime committed to honoring its libertarian ideals. He was a peer of France, an orator in the Chamber of Peers, an ardent polemicist in the press, a tireless campaigner in his efforts to insure the ongoing public recognition of Catholic culture amidst the political jockeying of the day. Attuned to the realities of shifting political alliances, he modified his position to suit circumstances as they evolved.

Milbach writes that Montalembert may have been the protagonist of this saga, since he was the demonstrative point man for advancing the Catholic agenda in the politics of that era, but he notes that the more patient and conciliatory Dupanloup was more successful in working through negotiations for the final compromise in the Falloux Law. Milbach's intent in developing the long prelude to its enactment is to show how it was not simply a product of immediate issues stemming from the revolution of 1848, but also and even more so from what had been the interminable search during the July Monarchy for a remedy to the relationship between public and private education with which all constituencies with a stake in educational reform could live. Strangely, Milbach labels this concluding negotiation an epilogue, whereas his overall interpretation suggests that it provided the denouement to his account of twenty years of contentious struggle. The Catholic movement thus abandoned its larger political ambitions and settled for a measure of autonomy within the sphere of education.

From a methodological standpoint, I would characterize Milbach's study as an old-fashioned narrative history, *une histoire événementielle* reminiscent of early twentieth-century French historical scholarship. It is Aristotelean in its linear sequencing, proceeding from beginnings in the Church's assessment of its situation in the aftermath of the revolution of 1830, through a middle in which Catholic leaders actively engaged in the politics of the July Monarchy, toward an ending in the implementation of a final educational settlement in the aftermath of the revolution of 1848. In his careful search for the *juste milieu* in the surprisingly extensive scholarship on this topic, Milbach arrives at his own balanced assessment. Drawing on that historiography and his own thoroughgoing research, he succeeds in presenting a comprehensive, yet intricate and nuanced interpretation. His extended narrative (more than 650 densely packed pages) requires patience in his reader, reflecting the patience of the historical actors who stubbornly pursued educational reform until a satisfactory compromise could be reached. It may be the only way to tell this particular history, a tale of kaleidoscopic encounters among multiple parties and personalities, each seeking in good faith to hammer out a viable policy amidst quarrels that for a long time defied resolution. In this respect, the inclusion of an analytical index would have greatly enhanced access to the essential elements of his interpretation.

Milbach's study embodies solid scholarship as it draws together a century of research and writing on church/state relations in mid-nineteenth-century France. It will serve as a useful point of departure for scholars who wish to explore the topic, given its particular insight into the role of those notables in those days who advocated so passionately for the Catholic cause in public life.

Patrick H. Hutton  
University of Vermont  
[phutton@uvm.edu](mailto:phutton@uvm.edu)

Copyright © 2016 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 edistribution/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.