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Noah Shusterman, *The French Revolution: Faith, Desire, and Politics*. London; New York: Routledge, 2014. xiv + 265. \$43.95. U.S. (pbk). ISBN-97804155660211.

Review by Mita Choudhury, Vassar College.

Writing an undergraduate survey of the French Revolution is a daunting task that needs to bring together an action packed time line, a wide array of characters, and a sometimes contentious historiography that dates back to the early years of the Revolution itself. In addition to organizing this information into a cohesive and brisk narrative, the author faces the challenge of presenting an interpretive framework that addresses the perennial questions regarding the origins, causes, and trajectory of the Revolution. In his assessment, Noah Shusterman begins with the premise “that religion and gender were key to how the Revolution unfolded”(p. 5). His approach acknowledges the important work done by Timothy Tackett and Dale Van Kley, among others, as well as Susanne Desan’s *Reclaiming the Sacred*, which was a significant milestone in injecting gender and religion into the narrative of the French Revolution.[1] No doubt, Shusterman’s own research shaped his distinctive take on one of the momentous events in European history.[2] Shusterman acknowledges that his discussion privileges certain developments over others. In order to highlight gender and religion in this relatively brief text, some important developments, such as the Haitian Revolution, are left relatively unexplored.

Shusterman’s chronology reflects his focus on the battles between the Church and the deputies of the Revolution. This perspective is mirrored in the book’s structure. Six out of eight chapters focus on the years 1789 to 1794, in other words, from the Revolution’s beginning through the Terror. In 1789, the deputies of the National Assembly essentially continued the policies of the Old Regime that had sought to reform the Church. Deputies inculcated with a dose of Enlightenment anticlericalism joined forces with Jansenist-leaning clerics, such as the abbé Grégoire, to bring the Church under the administrative purview of the state. Where they went too far was with the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the subsequent oath. According to Shusterman, “the Constituent Assembly’s attempt to reshape the Catholic Church turned the counter-revolution into a popular movement. It turned village against village; it turned the Revolution against the Church; and it turned wives against husbands” (p. 4).

Over the course of the book, Shusterman traces the struggles between secular revolutionaries and those who remained fiercely loyal to the Church. His emphasis on these conflicts (as well as on other areas of civil war) effectively highlights the division between Paris and much of France. Although Shusterman gives very little space to the conservative press’s support of the Church, especially during the early years, the theme of the refractory priests is threaded throughout.[3] Indeed, one of the features that gives life to Shusterman’s account is his attention to personalities. For example, he includes the story of the priest Jacques-Pierre Fleury to illustrate the experiences of those who resisted the Revolution. Yet, in casting the confrontation as one that took place between revolutionaries and priests, Shusterman overlooks the regular clergy. During the Old Regime, anticlerical rhetoric differentiated between monks, who could be caricatured as useless parasites, and parish priests who epitomized the virtues of

the *bon curé*. Significantly, this distinction between regular and secular clergy persisted in the early years of the Revolution. After all, the deputies of the Constituent Assembly were far less convinced of the social utility of monastics than they were of priests who lived among their parishioners. Surprisingly, given his emphasis on women, Shusterman does not discuss nuns, who represented a thorny problem for revolutionary deputies. Having embraced the narrative of the *vocation forcée*, the deputies sought to liberate these women religious, only to discover significant resistance. And, perhaps intimidated with the prospect of hundreds of single women released into society, many of whom lacked financial resources, the deputies allowed women religious to remain in the convent for a number of years.

As Shusterman rightly argues, religiosity was not just the province of the clergy and counter-revolutionaries. Revolutionaries endowed events and actions with the sacred to sanctify and legitimize the Revolution itself. Historians are well acquainted with the importance of revolutionary festivals, the revolutionary calendar, and the commemoration of events such as Marat's death. According to Shusterman, by 1793, "the Revolution, however, was becoming a religion in its own right. Or *rite*—the Revolution had a tradition of borrowing religious practices and putting them to revolutionary uses" (p. 187). Taking his cue directly from Michelet, he notes that the Jacobins were themselves "monastic," a fitting parallel since their Parisian branch rented their political space from the Dominicans. Indeed, Condorcet derided Robespierre for carrying himself like a priest. More than any other individual in this volume, Robespierre comes to life as a complex individual who negotiated a political minefield while rigidly adhering to his moral vision of the nation.

Shusterman attributes Robespierre's political ascendancy in part to the Parisian women who supported him at the National Convention. As the female support of Robespierre suggests, the radical women of Paris intervened at critical points during the Revolution, the most notable of which were the October Days of 1789. On the other side, women proved to be subversive in the Vendée with their unflagging support of refractory priests. According to Shusterman, "to some extent, there was more female activism aimed at what was then defined as "women's issues"—issues revolving around the home, around food or religion or children" (p. 147). Leading figures such as Olympe de Gouges, Théroigne de Méricourt, and Etta Palm were exceptions in their insistence that women were entitled to certain political rights. This particular discussion could have been enhanced with the inclusion of more textual material by and about women, which did, in fact, advocate for women's participation.

This focus on women's activism fits with the book's larger argument: "Questions of gender and sexuality, like questions of religion, intertwined with the question of politics at the highest level" (p. 4). Drawing from Lynn Hunt's work, Shusterman describes how gendered constructions of feminine sexuality were definitive elements of Old Regime anticlericalism and political culture. Given the centrality of this argument, he might have pushed considerations of masculinity and femininity during the Revolution even further.^[4] He rightly underscores how both sides excoriated their enemies precisely because women appeared to play prominent roles in their opponents' fight. For example, the book contains a provocative image of radical Parisian women punishing nuns as counter-revolutionaries (p. 81). It is unfortunate that this image was not examined further to show how representations of nuns were heavily politicized in 1791. The experiences of women religious and their symbolic weight as both women oppressed by the Old Regime and counter-revolutionary agents would have been an ideal vehicle for bringing together religion and gender, the book's central themes. What were the political implications of these gendered images, both in terms of masculinity as well as femininity?

Developing women's activism helps integrate women's history into the larger narrative of the French Revolution. Shusterman ties this participation to popular activism. Somewhat surprisingly, he only briefly mentions the legislative changes regarding divorce and inheritance during the Terror, advances that were then reversed under Napoleon. These were defining moments for the legal status of women in France that also reveal the conflicting legacy of the Revolution. In the brief section on Napoleon,

Shusterman suggests that rolling back such laws did not reflect “paternalism” so much as it did the decline of popular politics (p. 251). Unquestionably, the suppression of popular voices was an important element of French politics from Thermidor onward, but paternalism was equally central to the Napoleonic state. Moreover, how do we understand the somewhat contentious relationship that Napoleon had with elite women?

Relying on a variety of secondary sources as well as incorporating primary sources, Shusterman acknowledges how his retelling of the French Revolution would not have been possible without the above mentioned scholarship of recent decades. He also insists, however, that nineteenth-century historians such as Jules Michelet, Jean Jaurès, and Adolphe Thiers have relevance. The inclusion of their words, as well as those of Marat, Robespierre, and Danton, enlivens Shusterman’s narrative. Certainly, the genre of nineteenth-century history comes much closer to another nineteenth-century genre, the novel, and Shusterman uses its dramatic language to good effect throughout. Nevertheless, one might imagine that students, especially the undergraduates he references in his introduction, may find the different names bewildering and may not differentiate between Edgar Quinet and John McManners, for example. More importantly, what might be lost on those unfamiliar with the historiography of the French Revolution is the degree to which the writing of revolutionary history in the nineteenth century was, in and of itself, a political act and therefore overtly partisan. This is not to say that contemporary historians do not have their axes to grind as we saw in the late 1970s and 1980s with François Furet and the toppling of the Marxist interpretation. Nevertheless, however much the works of Michelet and Quinet might add to the telling of revolutionary history, they were also very much grounded in the anti-clerical politics of nineteenth-century French liberalism. Similarly, there must be a care to how nineteenth-century anticlericalism also represented nineteenth-century attitudes toward people in general and those of women in particular.

In his introduction, Shusterman begins with a description of his experience teaching the French Revolution. This vignette serves as a reminder of the important task that scholars face as teachers: how to communicate events and themes to people unfamiliar with a subject. His engaging style makes this author wish that she could see him in action in a classroom. Certainly, expressions such as “France’s coolest uncle, Philippe-Egalité (*né* Orléans)” must elicit laughter. At times, however, this conversational style threatens to distract the reader from the important points being made. Shusterman is to be applauded for veering away from more established and straightforward narratives. Overall, this book provides a welcome addition to the surveys of the French Revolution in its synthesis of two important elements, religion and gender. It adds another dimension that challenges common assumptions about the French Revolution.

NOTES

[1] See Timothy Tackett, *Religion, Revolution, and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-Century France: The Ecclesiastical Oath of 1791* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986); Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996); Suzanne Desan, *Reclaiming the Sacred: Lay Religion and Popular Politics in Revolutionary France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990).

[2] Shusterman, “All of his Power Lies in the Distaff: Robespierre, Women and the French Revolution,” *Past and Present* 223 (May 2014): 129-160; Noah Shusterman, *Religion and the Politics of Time in Holidays from Louis XIV through Napoleon* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 2010).

[3] Sophia Rosenfeld, *Common Sense: A Political History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 199-215.

[4] Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French revolution* (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1992). See also Mita Choudhury, *Convents and Nuns in French Politics and Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004); Jennifer Heuer, *The Family and the Nation: Gender and Citizenship in Revolutionary France, 1789-1830* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005); Claire Cage, "‘Celibacy is a Social Crime’: The Politics of Clerical Marriage, 1793-1797," *French Historical Studies* 36 (Fall 2013): 601-628. (Cage’s book *Unnatural Frenchmen: the Politics of Priestly Celibacy and Marriage, 1720-1815* appeared in 2015, after the publication of Shusterman’s book.) More recently, Kate Marsden’s work complicates the picture of nuns during the Revolution. See Kate Marsden, "The Murder of Anne Durif: Local Religious Politics in the French Revolution," *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 39 (2011): 144-154.

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