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Nigel Aston, *Religion and Revolution in France, 1780-1804*. Washinton, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press and London: Macmillan Press, 2000. xii + 435 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$44.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8132-0976-5. \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-8132-0977-3.

Review by David Garrioch, Monash University.

Recent work on both the Old Regime and the French Revolution has reaffirmed the importance of religion in any account of the period. After a period when religious history was less popular, the work of John McManners, Michel Vovelle, Dominique Julia, Olwen Hufton, Tim Tackett, Dale Van Kley, Claude Langlois, and many others has re-established its central place in the social and political history of eighteenth-century France. Nigel Aston has already made his mark in this field with his work on the French bishops, and his new book confirms his place among its principal scholars.^[1] His goal is to provide "an introduction to the history of France between the reigns of Louis XVI and Napoleon I, one that restores religious issues to the centre of discussion—exactly where they belong" (p. x). As a synthesis both of recent work and of older studies in religious history, it is a *tour de force*. The range of secondary sources consulted is huge and includes many local and older studies that are difficult to obtain. These are supplemented with a selection of archival and printed primary material. From this corpus of evidence Aston has produced a cautious reinterpretation, picking his way between the more extravagant claims of Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish historians and those of latter-day anticlericals. His own sympathies lie principally with those moderate Catholics who, during a period of extraordinary turbulence, managed to pick out a similarly cautious middle way, attempting to reconcile the demands of conscience with a practical appreciation of the realities of their situation. But he also writes sympathetically of the conscientious believers of all persuasions who struggled to maintain their integrity despite the turmoil: Constitutional clergy, refractory priests and nuns, Protestant pastors, and Jews.

The early chapters, which introduce the eighteenth-century background, will be enormously useful to students and teachers. They provide valuable summaries of the structures and personnel of the Gallican Church and of the broad changes in religious belief and practice that were taking place in the decades before 1789. Equally useful is the section summarizing the situations of Protestants and Jews at the end of the Old Regime. It is followed by a chapter on the Enlightenment and the Church, which argues that the French Enlightenment was distinctive in being less firmly grounded in religious belief than was the case elsewhere in Europe. Although the so-called "Catholic Enlightenment" was influential in France and was to help determine clerical responses to the Revolution, it remained a "side-current" (p. 83). The mainstream of the French Enlightenment, Aston claims, was as hostile to dogma as it was to hierarchy. Yet he also argues that deism and atheism were not widespread and that most educated French people were influenced more by criticism of the upper clergy and by arguments for religious reform based on social utility. These points are compatible if one defines the Enlightenment narrowly, though if we follow most recent historians in adopting a broader definition, one that includes the many minor writers and the educated men and women who read their work, the French Enlightenment probably does not look so different in its thinking from its counterparts in other Catholic areas.

Aston also argues against much recent writing by playing down the importance of Jansenism.^[2] Once again, he is able to do so because he defines the movement very narrowly, in theological and clerical terms primarily applicable to Louis XIV's time. This leads him, in my view, to underestimate the significance of the transformed eighteenth-century Jansenism in promoting liturgical and structural reform of the Church, particularly among the laity.

But the great contribution of this book is to the history of the French Revolution, and here the picture of events that emerges from Aston's account is in certain respects an unfamiliar one. Whereas every student of the period is acquainted with the conflicts over the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and over the clerical oath, with the outbreak of the Vendée and Federalist revolts, and with the dechristianization campaigns of the Year II, very few know how the clergy reacted in 1789. Aston's fascinating analysis of the elections and the cahiers sheds new light on the opening year of the Revolution. He goes on to study the growing divisions within the Church as the Revolution turned decisively against privilege and against corporatism, and he reaches an unexpected conclusion: had a General Assembly of the French Church been permitted, it might have accepted the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Opposition was provoked not solely by the content of the reforms, but equally by the way they were imposed, permitting no recognition of the Church's hard-won autonomy. Eighteenth-century historians will be reminded of the imposition of the Papal Bull *Unigenitus*, which for similar reasons caused an earlier split in the French Church. In the 1790s, however, the end result was the destruction of Gallicanism, as the Revolution forced the clergy to choose between the Papacy on the one hand and unconditional support of state policy on the other.

Nevertheless, Aston reveals the religious divide to have been less clear-cut than most standard histories suggest. Even for clerics who could not take the oath, loyalty to the state was deeply ingrained and did not disappear overnight. Among the laity, in many places people at first attended both Constitutional and non-juror services. It was the further radicalization of the Revolution that made the Constitutional Church unworkable, not massive rejection by the population. Later too, towards the end of the decade, in places where lay Catholics had constructed their own religious practices in the absence of clergy, some rejected priests of both persuasions. These are all important revisions of a history that can easily be oversimplified.

The sections on the Terror, on dechristianization, and on the religious politics of the Directory are once again useful summaries, but of more interest—because hard to find elsewhere—is Aston's coverage of the experience of the Constitutional and Protestant Churches and a more cursory survey of the Jewish experience during the Revolution. The final section, an account of the religious situation during the Consulate and of the politics of the Concordat, I thought one of the best sections of the book, another deft synthesis of a neglected and confusing period. He explains the motives and the uncertainties of both Bonaparte and Pius VII and stresses the huge changes in the religious situation and the broader political context that made the settlement possible. While the importance of religious affairs during the Directory has been stressed in a growing body of historical work, setting them at the centre of the history of the Consulate sheds significant new light on the period.

The villains in this book, though in a very subtle way, are the revolutionary politicians and the urban elites who tried to impose Enlightenment-inspired reforms on a population with whom they had lost touch (and, of course, the philosophes who disseminated these ideologies in the first place). As a result of "conventional Enlightenment commonplaces," the revolutionaries of 1791 perceived the Church as "a formidable rival whose influence in the state would inevitably have to be confronted" (p. 167). There is an unresolved tension between statements like this, which suggest a predetermined view within the National Assembly, and the process of "becoming revolutionaries."^[3] Yet the impact of the revolutionary process is one that Aston handles extremely well when dealing with the clergy. He recognises the socio-economic factors, the issues of status, and the divided loyalties that influenced many of them. Their opponents are more stereotyped.

It must be said, too, that despite its significant reinterpretation of certain key topics, Aston's book is conservative in approach. I have already referred to his narrow and traditional definitions of the Enlightenment and of Jansenism. The framework of the book remains that of top-down political and institutional history: the early chapters set up the structure of the Gallican church before turning to religious belief, and high politics drives the story--though to be fair, he does accord the social history of religion a significant place. In general, he is more interested in clerical politics than in lay religious politics, and some of the most vivid and sympathetic writing is reserved for the quandaries of upper churchmen caught up in events for which nothing in their past lives had fully prepared them. Overall, if there is a central theme to the book it is perhaps the end of the Gallican Church. In all these senses, the book might more accurately be titled "Church and Revolution." This is not necessarily a criticism: many readers will find it a congenial and accessible approach. Those of us who teach courses on the Enlightenment and French Revolution, as well as general readers wanting a detailed, well-written synthesis of the religious history of this complex period, are very much in Nigel Aston's debt.

NOTES

[1] Nigel Aston, *The End of an Elite: The French Bishops and the Coming of the Revolution, 1786-1790* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[2] See the work of Dale Van Kley, most recently *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1996); and from a different angle entirely, Monique Cottret, *Jansénisme et Lumières. Pour un autre XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998).

[3] Cf. Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790)* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), esp. pp. 74-76.

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