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Anne Cova and Bruno Dumons, eds., *Destins de Femmes: Religion, culture et société France--XIXe-XXe siècles*. Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 2010. 466 pp. Notes, bibliography. 38.40€ (cl). ISBN : 978-2-7063-0275-6.

Review by Sarah A. Curtis, San Francisco State University.

Although the title of this volume accurately describes its theme, nothing in it suggests its form, which is a collection of short (one- to three-page) alphabetically arranged biographies of 260 “religious” women, written by eighty-six different authors and spanning the period from the early nineteenth century to the late twentieth, ending in about the 1970s. Unsurprisingly, Catholic women dominate—192 of the entries—but also included are twenty-nine Protestants, two Orthodox, sixteen Jews, eighteen freethinkers, and three women “leaning towards” Saint-Simonianism or spiritualism (p. 22). (One awaits the inclusion of Muslim women.) These are women who were significantly influenced by religious (or anti-religious) ideas to political, social or cultural achievements. Each notice is followed by a short bibliography, which supplements the general bibliography at the end of the book. Although some of the entries distill important recent research, many of the bibliographies are scant or dated enough to suggest there is still work to be done. One of the results of this publication, I hope, is to inspire further study of many of these women as well as their inclusion in more general histories.

The entries are preceded by an introduction that ably traces the historiography of the intersection of women’s history and religious history. The copious notes alone, rich in both French- and English-language works, provide a rich survey of the burgeoning literature on various aspects of women and religious experience in the last few decades. The editors also correctly note that other such prosopographical studies have focused on political figures or religious elites to the exclusion of women; this volume serves as a corrective.

The biographies themselves paint a fascinating collective portrait of a wide variety of women, most of whom, I would guess, are unknown to H-France readers. By browsing through the entries, almost any scholar, including specialists in religious and gender history, can make interesting new discoveries. The oldest is Catherine Jarrige (b. 1754, d. 1836), a Dominican tertiary renowned for her good works among the poor in the Cantal; and the youngest is Pauline Bebe (b. 1964), the first (and to date the only) female rabbi in France. The individual with the shortest lifespan is Anne de Guigné (b. 1911, d. 1922) an eleven-year-old girl who experienced a religious conversion on the death of her father in World War I. The chronological center of gravity consists of individuals born between around 1880 and 1920; the editors calculate that they have included more women active in the twentieth than the nineteenth century, including individuals who are still alive. Among the Catholic women, many, especially for the earlier period, are, unsurprisingly, nuns (often founders of important religious orders), but the entries also include philanthropic laywomen, educators, writers, scholars, mystics, and even actresses. Starting with the late nineteenth century, the number of women involved in political and union activity, largely under Catholic auspices, increases. Since many of these causes were conservative in nature, they remind us of the extent to which feminist scholars have neglected many of these women who were, nonetheless, political and social figures of significance. Given the plethora of recent research on French imperialism,

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I would have wished for more colonial women (beyond French missionaries), like the entry on Caroline Newedou, a native of New Caledonia, who served her people as a Catholic nun.

Because the majority of Frenchwomen were Catholic, the nearly two hundred entries of Catholic women emphasize their actions or writings on behalf of Catholic causes; the same is generally true for the entries on Protestant women. (There are some surprises here nonetheless; the renowned child psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto is not best known for her Catholic beliefs, but they warrant her inclusion.) For the Jewish women, however, there is some slippage between Jewish identity and Jewish activity, exemplified perhaps in the notice on Lucie Dreyfus, wife of Alfred. On the one hand, one could certainly make the argument that she became one of the best known Jewish women in France. But on the other hand, the notice itself admits that “la dimension religieuse est faiblement présente, limitée à des motifs presque abstraits où l’on chercherait presque vainement une identité judaïque affirmée” (p. 164).

The inclusion of freethinkers among the selection criteria means that there are biographies of ardent supporters of *laïcité*, who were overtly hostile to religion. When I read the entry for Hubertine Auclert, it seemed an anomaly; by the time I finished those for Simone de Beauvoir, Maria Deraismes, Jeanne Deroin, Madeleine Pelletier, Caroline Rémy (Séverine), Clémence Royer, Nelly Roussel, and George Sand, among others, I realized that their inclusion was a deliberate strategy, making in effect an argument that strong support of *laïcité* required a rejection of the religious model of the world. In a volume edited in France, where *laïcité* often seems a faith in and of itself, this is perhaps not a surprise. These women do make the volume more broadly appealing to a wider selection of scholars, but they are also better known, which makes their inclusion perhaps more superfluous.

What I wanted to know most of all was how the editors chose these 260 women. When the volume landed in my mailbox the first thing I did was to look up “my” three women, missionaries featured in a recent collective biography.<sup>[1]</sup> Two of them were listed, the third (and least known up to now) was not. Such is the accident of timing. I was sorry, however, not to see an entry on Claire Ferchaud, the subject of an excellent recent study by Raymond Jonas,<sup>[2]</sup> and stunned not to find one on Pauline Jaricot, the nineteenth-century founder of the Oeuvre de la Propagation de la Foi. In the introduction, the editors disavow any attempt at comprehensiveness, a reasonable enough disclaimer, and state that they favored “l’apport d’éléments neufs et novateurs” and “dans le cas contraire, nous avons préféré ne pas faire figurer telle ou telle personnalité, même connue ou célèbre” (p. 22). Yet well-known figures are included (see, for example, Thérèse Martin, aka Thérèse de Lisieux), so these particular omissions seem more careless than deliberate.

There may be other important gaps, and one certainly hopes there will be new research, which raises the problem of keeping such a volume up-to-date. Much as I appreciate a bound book that can reside on my shelves, I wonder why, in this digital age, such a project is not accompanied, or replaced, by a digital version that could be edited and added to over time and not constrained by space limitations—a database rather than a dictionary. Nonetheless, this is a worthy reference book that can join other French research guides to the history of religion and the history of women.<sup>[3]</sup> By writing these women back into the historical record, it reminds us of a vibrant world of women inspired by religious faith and identity, whose story remains fully to be told. We will know that day has come when a volume such as this one is no longer necessary because these women have been fully integrated into the political, social, cultural, and intellectual history of their times.

## NOTES

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[1] Sarah A. Curtis, *Civilizing Habits: Women Missionaries and the Revival of French Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Philippine Duchesne and Anne-Marie Javouhey are included; Emilie de Vialar is not.

[2] Raymond Jonas, *The Tragic Tale of Claire Ferchaud and the Great War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[3] I am thinking especially of Daniel-Odon Hurel, ed., *Guide pour l'histoire des ordres et des congrégations religieuses: France, XVIe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Brepols, 2001) and Christine Bard, Annie Metz, Valérie Neveu, *Guide des sources de l'histoire du féminisme* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2006).

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