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*H-France Review* Vol. 15 (October 2015), No. 137

Joseph F. Byrnes, *Priests of the French Revolution: Saints and Renegades in a New Political Era*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014. xxvi + 314pp. \$74.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0271063775.

Review by Noah Shusterman, Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Joseph Byrnes' *Priests of the French Revolution: Saints and Renegades in a New Political Era* covers an aspect of the French Revolution that has traditionally been underrepresented in the historiography, the many Catholic clerics who supported the Revolution. Advocates of the Revolution have tended to portray it as a needed break with the Catholic Church. As a result most have either paid little attention to pro-Revolution clerics or treated them as if they were not clerics at all. Catholic critics of the Revolution, on the other hand, have tended to view the Revolution as inherently anti-Christian, and have focused on those priests who opposed the Revolution. In either portrayal, pro-Revolutionary clerics appear either as some sort of aberration or as calculating careerists. Byrnes' informative and well-researched book helps fill that historiographical gap. The book is a useful resource for those clerics who did not oppose the revolutionary government, and offers strong portraits of many lesser known clerics who are rarely if ever discussed in Anglophone works. The unevenness of the portrayals and the choppy nature of the book as a whole, though, make it less successful as an overall account. There is a lot to learn from this book, but Byrnes' methodology limits the book's effectiveness and makes the book unsuitable for a cover-to-cover reading.

The French Revolution had a stormy relationship with the Catholic Church. Its 1789 nationalization of many church lands, declaration of freedom of religious opinion, and its early 1790 refusal to declare Catholicism the religion of the kingdom, disappointed many of the clerical deputies who had arrived at the Estates-General sympathetic with the social causes of the Third Estate, yet also hoping that a regenerated kingdom would have a stronger and more explicitly Catholic morality. It was the June 1790 Civil Constitution of the Clergy, however, along with the 1791 requirement that many of the nation's clerics (including all bishops and village priests) swear their allegiance to the new church regulations, that brought about a break between the Revolution and a large part of the Catholic Church. From that point on, France's Catholic clerics were divided into two camps, the "Constitutionals" who took the oath, and the nearly half of the nation's clerics who refused to do so. The latter group, the "Refractories," have dominated historians' accounts of Catholic religious practice during the Revolution. At the risk of pointing out the obvious, if nearly half of the clerics refused to take the oath, that means that more than half did take it. The stories of those men, however, have been lacking. This lacuna is why Byrnes' book is a welcome addition to a thin literature.

Byrnes divides the book into three sections, which he labels Engagement, Survival, and Revival. These refer not surprisingly to the early Revolution, the radical Revolution, and the period that followed—the last going from Thermidor into the Napoleonic era. In 1789, there were 115,000 priests in France (p. xiii). Even if half of them became opponents of the Revolution, that still leaves tens of thousands who might be called "priests of the French Revolution," and therefore worthy of inclusion in Byrnes' book. Not all are included, of course, and this is not a quantitative account, or anything close. His approach instead is to offer sketches of specific priests who, in one way or another, supported the French

Revolution. This rubric covers an extremely broad range of people. The traditional archetype here remains the Abbé Grégoire, famous for having attempted to fuse the message of the gospel with the Revolution, even when that was not the most popular message among his fellow politicians during the Reign of Terror. Grégoire gets his share of attention in the book, along with his often-ignored and much less well known collaborators in the Constitutional Church. Yet, as Byrnes shows, this was only one of many paths that former clerics could take. The Abbé Sieyès, after all, may be best known as the spokesman for the Third Estate coming into the meeting of the Estates General, but he was not the lawyer Sieyès or the merchant Sieyès. He was an abbot, a cleric with the training of a cleric and the occupation of a cleric, even if he lacked the faith that readers today might expect of a cleric.

Including Sieyès in a book about Revolutionary priests is an interesting step, since he is often omitted from the religious history of the Revolution due to his lack of interest in anything that strikes a modern reader as in any way religious. Byrnes tries to nuance this story a bit, showing that Sieyès had a “vestigial religious sentiment,” but that is not the most interesting reason for including Sieyès. Non-believing clerics were common in Old Regime France, and by having Sieyès stand in for them, Byrnes is able to offer some suggestions for a rethinking of the role that other non-believing clerics had in Revolutionary France.

The real value of Byrnes’ work, however, is that most of it is devoted to men who, unlike Sieyès, have not been the subject of extensive historical study. Some are completely unknown to most scholars of the Revolution, men like Claude Le Coz or Jean-Baptiste Royer, both of whom played major roles during the Directory. Others are frequently mentioned but rarely investigated in any depth. Claude Fauchet, who was a significant player in the Revolution, gets a well-deserved chapter, as does Antoine-Adrienne Lamourette (of “Kiss of Lamourette” fame, and readers can learn more here about his life outside of that one moment). The radical leader Jacques Roux also receives a substantial discussion, as Byrnes explores the ways that Roux combined his religious training, fiery temperament, and belief in justice to explain how he rose to prominence in 1793. Byrnes is able to do a good job of showing the diversity of paths that these “priests of the Revolution” took after 1789. Though he does not make the point as explicitly as he might have, a picture emerges from the first part of the book that a priest who supported the Revolution had many paths open to him. Again, it is a book full of sketches and vignettes of various men, not an overall attempt to analyze the clerics of the Revolutionary years, but the choice of men upon whom Byrnes chooses to focus provides for a plausible enough typology of religious and non-religious engagement of various forms. The middle section of the book, “Survival,” shows how the options became more limited as the Revolution radicalized. Sieyès kept to himself and survived. Roux, Fauchet, and Lamourette, along with men like Gobel, the Archbishop of Paris, all spoke out, and all died for it. Chabot, another cleric who deserves more attention in the historiography, chose a more opportunist path, marrying a rich heiress and rising high on the political ladder. (He too died, though there the cause lay in his allegiance to Danton.)

Byrnes’ book is not a religious history of the Revolution. Its sketches, portraits, and vignettes about individual men have their advantages, as they give the reader a chance to get to know an interesting group of men and try to understand their experiences in the Revolution. It is hard not to wonder, though, whether Byrnes chose this approach out of expediency. Methodologically, this is a book of close readings. Most of Byrnes’ sources are printed materials from the period, though he does use some archival material for some sections. There is nothing inherently wrong with such an approach, especially given the relative obscurity of many of these sources, but Byrnes rarely if ever puts his texts into any sort of dialogue with other sources, neither with secondary sources, nor with other primary sources. This approach gets frustrating over the course of the book. His discussion of constitutional priest and Convention deputy Yves-Marie Audrein, for example, consists almost exclusively of readings of four of Audrein’s speeches (pp. 103-108). Even for Lamourette, for whom there is ample material available, Byrnes relies on one published pastoral instruction. A quick perusal of the book’s footnotes

shows that the overwhelming majority—at least two-thirds, if not closer to three-quarters—are either “*ibid.*” or some variation thereof.

If this method is problematic for the first two sections of the book, it becomes even more so for the final third. Byrnes’ section on “Revival” is something close to, but not quite, a history of the Constitutional Church after the Terror. Again, there is a real historiographical gap addressed here, as it discusses the post-Terror church without being limited to a discussion of Grégoire. The change of approaches, however, puts Byrnes’ methodology at even more of a strain. As limited as the approach is in the earlier parts of the book, it has its advantages in letting readers get to know specific clerics. An institutional history is a very different task, yet Byrnes doubles down on his methodology, relying heavily (and often exclusively) on readings of Encyclical Letters, specific series from the National Archives, and, above all, the *Annales de la Religion*, the official mouthpiece of the Constitutional Church. These are invaluable sources, but integrating the readings with other available primary sources and the admittedly limited secondary literature would have made a more complete story. Byrnes’ final chapter is particularly problematic in this regard. Of the final chapter’s sixty-seven footnotes, eight (consecutively) are from one letter from a bishop to a representative of the pope, and fifty-three (also consecutively) are from the *Annales de la Religion*. Only the chapter’s first three and last three footnotes offer any other texts.

There are also some inconsistencies in the writing that are worth noting. It often jumps maddeningly between past and present tense while French and English names for particular institutions mingle together, including one paragraph which mentions both the “Committee of Public Safety” and the “Comité de sûreté generale” (p. 109). Such inconsistencies do not on their own make or break a book, of course, but they do make it clear that the book merited considerably more time and effort than it received.

*Priests of the French Revolution: Saints and Renegades in a New Political Era*, despite these shortcomings, will still be a welcome addition to library collections. Its information about relatively unknown yet influential men, its readings of important texts, and its introduction to the issues of the post-Terror Constitutional Church are all important additions to a thin literature. The portraits of the unknown individuals will especially complement Nigel Aston’s *Religion and Revolution in France*. Byrnes notes in his prologue that this book is only part of a larger project that will eventually include a dictionary of the bishops of the Constitutional Church and an on-line repertoire of constitutional priests. These resources will add further to the additions that Byrnes has made to our knowledge of the era, and will likely fit better with Byrnes’ methods and approach.

#### NOTE

[1] Nigel Aston, *Religion and Revolution in France, 1780-1804* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000).

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ISSN 1553-9172