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Rodney J. Dean, *L'Assemblée constituante et la réforme ecclésiastique, 1790*. Paris and London: Rodney Dean, 2014. 797 pp. 45 € (pb). ISBN 13: 978-2-7084-0886-9.

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Nearly five decades ago, John McManners, a distinguished historian of religion who focused primarily on eighteenth-century France, wrote a brief but incisive survey, *The French Revolution and the Church*. In it, he asserted that if it was possible to determine a point at which the Revolution “went wrong,” it was, in his view, on November 27, 1790, the date on which the National Assembly required an oath to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy.^[1] With respect to the Revolution as a whole, and by the criterion that McManners utilized of ending national unity, a more appropriate event might be the arrest of Louis XVI at Varennes and his return to Paris, but if one narrowed the scope to a single action of the National Assembly, there can be little doubt that the imposition of the oath would be it.

The religious history of the Revolution has a rich and abundant literature, but analysis of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy has concentrated primarily on its effects, particularly the degree of adhesion by clergy, with its enactment and the subsequent requirement of an oath to it treated more in passing. Rodney J. Dean fills this lacuna with his exhaustive and, it must be said, at times exhausting, treatment of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the Ecclesiastical Oath. Dean, an independent British historian who studied both as an undergraduate and as an M.A. student with Norman Hampson and who later earned his doctorate at the Sorbonne under Jean Tulard, with his dissertation committee chaired by abbé Bernard Plongeron, has found a fruitful second career as a scholar of different periods of the religious history of the Revolution. This is his third book, and he anticipates a volume that will continue and complete the work under review by examining the remaining period of the National Assembly continuing into the Legislative Assembly.^[2]

Dean seeks to investigate the origin of the Constitutional Church by concentrating on principal members of the Ecclesiastical Committee, an astute decision that recognizes the critical role played by certain committees in the operation of the National Assembly. The deputies on whom he focuses are Armand-Gaston Camus, Jean-Baptiste Treilhard, Louis-Simon Martineau, and Pierre-Toussaint Durand de Maillaine, the last of whom wrote an account of the work of the Ecclesiastical Committee. At the same time, however, Dean ranges far beyond the committee and the Assembly, examining diplomacy, pamphlet literature, Parisian section meetings, theater presentations and provincial towns, especially Montauban and Nîmes, which were roiled by religious turmoil and violence.

Dean begins his work with a survey of the path to reform under the Old Regime, although the starting point of the Council of Constance takes it beyond even what would be regarded as the old regime, and moves forward through the Concordat of Bologna, Richerism, especially in Lorraine and Dauphiné, and Jansenism up to the eve of the Revolution. He even makes a brief excursion to the Austrian Empire to touch upon the reforms of Joseph II.

The origins of the Constitutional Church stemmed from the meeting of the night of August 4, during which tithes were renounced, although Dean deals only with the final decree that the Assembly

completed on August 11. The tithe had produced 80,000,000 *livres*, supporting 70,000 clergy throughout the kingdom, which meant that a new method of financing was needed. Consequently, on August 12, the deputy Charles-Antoine Chasset proposed the formation of a committee to deal with matters related to the clergy, leading to the election of the Ecclesiastical Committee on August 20.

During the discussion of the August decrees, the question of the lands of the church had been raised by François-Nicolas Buzot, who asserted that they belonged to the nation, and within weeks the property of the church became a focal point for the Assembly. On October 10 Charles-Maurice Talleyrand-Périgord proposed an “operation on church property” that would dedicate one-third of church revenues to support the state. The final outcome occurred on November 2 with the approval of an artfully-worded phrase, crafted by Mirabeau, that the lands of the church were “at the disposition of the nation,” thus avoiding any mention of confiscation or dispossession.

An initial report by Durand de Mallaine for the Ecclesiastical Committee was cautious and sought not to antagonize the clergy, but reforms undertaken during the fall of 1789 and winter of 1790, examined by Dean, became too radical and unacceptable for the majority of bishops of the old regime. Internal opposition within the committee led to its reorganization, with the Assembly voting to add fifteen members. The ostensible reason for this action was because of the committee’s heavy workload, but in reality, as Dean argues, it was to diminish the weight of the internal opposition. The revamped committee divided itself into three sections to undertake different tasks, including a plan to draft a new constitution for the clergy.

By April 21 the committee had prepared its report on the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, and it marked a change of direction. In his earlier report, Durand de Maillane had suggested that the monarch would have the right to appoint bishops from among three candidates, but the April report, contending that ministers of religion were established to serve the people, stated that it was appropriate for the people themselves to choose them. The April report also raised for the first time the idea of an obligatory oath for all practicing Catholic clergy. To buttress its position, the Ecclesiastical Committee argued that its proposals were based upon practices of the early church and the New Testament.

Discussion of the project by the Assembly opened on May 29. Jean de Dieu-Raymond de Cucé de Boisgelin, archbishop of Aix, disputed the report, especially the elective principle to select bishops and parish priests. His dissent led Boisgelin to prepare what would become the *Exposition des principes*, a statement of opposition to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Dean agrees in passing with the conclusion of Dale Van Kley that in the *Exposition* one can discern the beginning stages of the throne and altar ideology of the right against heretics and *philosophes*.^[3]

Dean focuses on the efforts of Treilhard and Camus to defend the plan of the committee, with Camus citing the use of an election to replace the apostle Judas with Matthias. The issue of election, particularly whether the participants should be all electors or only the faithful, remained a point of contention throughout. Acknowledging that the enactment of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy angered the vast majority of French prelates, Dean nevertheless praises the Ecclesiastical Committee as fair-minded and argues that the Assembly sincerely attempted to craft a just and comprehensive reform.

After its approval, however, bishops began to organize opposition to it, and this development would change the attitude of many deputies. Dean observes that episcopal deputies in the Assembly maintained a silence and allowed their colleagues outside to take the lead in opposition. Boisgelin’s publication of his *Exposition des principes* in late October, which was signed by most bishops and, Dean argues, misunderstood by both the Pope and the left in the Assembly, provoked a strong response from three committees of the Assembly.

During October and November, resistance by chapters and prelates became more pronounced and overt, as their refusal to read approved laws of the Assembly grew into a source of dismay for deputies, strengthening their belief that the clergy was increasingly hostile to the Revolution. Dean finds that between July and November, 1790, at least fifty-one bishops or chapters publicly proclaimed their opposition to ecclesiastical reform. The activities in departments drove a greater wedge between bishops in the Assembly and their colleagues outside of it.

The catalyst for the passage of the requirement of an oath of loyalty to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy was the election on November 2, 1790, of Louis-Alexandre Expilly, a member of the Ecclesiastical Committee, as the first constitutional bishop in France, defeating the bishop of Léon. After the bishop of Léon wrote a letter, the contents of which are unknown but which Dean believes sternly informed electors that they were committing a mortal sin that would lead to eternal damnation, the Assembly reacted. On November 26, Jean-Georges-Charles Voidel, emphasizing the importance of obedience to all of the reforms contained in the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, introduced a proposal requiring an oath of loyalty to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Late the next night, the Assembly approved Voidel's decree, with, as Dean notes, momentous consequences, the most immediate of which was an amplification of chapter protests.

Dean concludes that the principal architects of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in the Ecclesiastical Committee genuinely believed themselves to be friends of the church who sought to regenerate it by suppressing abuses and returning it to the foundations of the early church. All of them also voted for Voidel's project, Dean argues, as the only means to deter members of the clergy from their objectionable behavior.

For their part, Dean contends, the prelates did not understand the values of the Revolution. He asserts that their conduct was driven less by concern about the loss of the wealth of the Church than by fear for the future. An effort by Boisgelin to reach an agreement with the National Assembly and to persuade Pope Pius VI to accept changes in the French church failed, in large measure because the pope and cardinals had condemned reform almost immediately, perhaps as early as March, 1790.

As a delineation of the enactment of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the subsequent requirement of an oath of loyalty to it, Dean's work will remain definitive for some time to come. The title of the work ends with 1790, and the subtitle mentions only the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the Ecclesiastical Oath of November 27, but the book more closely approximates a survey of religious reform by the National Assembly and reaction to it through November, 1790. Indeed, Dean does not examine consideration of the debate on the Civil Constitution of the Clergy until page 359 of his eighth chapter, and he does not begin his treatment of the Ecclesiastical Oath until page 639 of chapter fifteen.

The detail is granular and at times excessive, overwhelming the reader with extensive quotations from debates or the complete text of legislation that is otherwise easily accessible to the author's intended audience. It is all the more regrettable because such detail sometimes serves to obscure or overshadow perceptive arguments or judgments. With respect to the Ecclesiastical Oath, for example, Dean not only notes that under the Old Regime, the taking of oaths had major cultural significance, but also devotes attention to the generally-overlooked visit of Louis XVI to the Assembly on February 4, 1790, his first visit to the Assembly and done without ceremony. During the session, Louis, although he did not take an oath, promised to defend the constitution being drafted by the Assembly. After the monarch departed, deputies voted to take a civic oath, pledging loyalty to the nation, the law and the king and to uphold with all of their power the constitution voted by the Assembly and accepted by the king. Without question, deputies regarded the monarch's remarks not as a gesture but as a binding covenant and, with this precedent, less than a year later the Assembly believed it entirely proper to ask for a similar simple assent, without reserve, from the clergy. It is an insightful argument, but is nearly lost under a welter of detail.

Dean generously acknowledges and respectfully engages the scholarship of others, but a few choices are puzzling. He uses Nigel Aston's excellent survey on Christianity and Revolutionary Europe but does not appear to have consulted two other of Aston's books, both specifically devoted to France and the Revolution, that would have been germane to his study.[4] Although there is no standard recognized biography of Talleyrand—in many respects Lacour-Gayet still serves—that of Jean Orioux is not one that should be cited.[5]

The religious debates in the Assembly provoked great passion, so much so that at one point they led to a duel between Charles de Lameth and Armand-Charles-Augustin de la Croix, duc de Castries, and the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the Ecclesiastical Oath created a fault line that endured for more than a decade. Against this contentious background, and based on research in the *Bibliothèque Port-Royal* and the *Archives Nationales*, Dean offers a measured perspective and careful judgments in a work that adds additional luster to his noteworthy second career.

NOTES

[1] John McManners, *The French Revolution & the Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 38.

[2] His earlier works are *L'Église Constitutionnelle, Napoléon et le Concordat de 1801* (Paris: R.J. Dean, 2004) and *L'Abbé Grégoire et l'église constitutionnelle après la Terreur, 1794-1797* (Paris: Picard, 2008).

[3] Dale Van Klee, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 1996).

[4] Nigel Aston, *The End of an Elite: The French Bishops and the Coming of the Revolution, 1786-1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) and *Religion and Revolution in France, 1780-1804* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000).

[5] Georges Lacour-Gayet, *Talleyrand, 1754-1838*, 3 vols. (Paris: Payot, 1928-31); Jean Orioux, *Talleyrand ou le sphinx incompris* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970).

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