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**Michael Broers**, *The Politics of Religion in Napoleonic Italy. The War against God, 1801-1814*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. xvi + 238pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$80.00 U.S (hb). ISBN 0-415-26670-X.

Review by Malcolm Crook, Keele University.

Michael Broers is a leading scholar of the Napoleonic period who has already published both a splendid general survey of the Empire and a substantial monograph on Piedmont during this period.[1] In this slim but important book he applies his considerable expertise to the issue of religion in the Italian peninsula during the French occupation. The all-encompassing headline notwithstanding, his study does not embrace the Mezzogiorno, where the impact of the war against God was moderated by the relative autonomy of the kingdom of Naples, but concentrates on the centre and north: Rome, the kingdom of Italy, and the *départements réunis* annexed to France. As befits a former student of Richard Cobb, a vast range of archival sources has been consulted, both in Paris and at numerous locations in Italy. Needless to say, this represents a significant undertaking, and Broers has produced a challenging volume which explores a great deal of uncharted territory and applies some exciting concepts to the material that has been unearthed in the process. Indeed, if the geographical scope is a little less than the title might suggest, the chronological span is much broader, ranging from the Tridentine era to the age of nation states. This sweep across three centuries of Mediterranean catholic culture demonstrates considerable boldness on the part of a self-confessed protestant Ulsterman, but Broers has never been short of scholarly ambition.

The treatment is thus thematic, ably conducted in some weighty chapters on the religion of the rulers, the religion of the ruled, and an analysis of clerical attitudes to the Concordat. By eschewing narrative Broers is free to apply the familiar polarity between centre and periphery as a powerful explanatory tool. Tracing successive attempts to impose a new order across time as well as space, he offers some suggestive insights into the resonances between catholic reformers who despaired of "nuestras indias" up in the hills, French invaders bearing Enlightenment, and finally the modernizing agenda of the later unified Italian state which faced similar battles with the church. He neatly encapsulates this development as Borromeo to Bonaparte. More original is the use of imperialism, and Edward Said's concept of orientalism, as perspectives on the essentially cultural nature of the struggle that pitted Italian church against the French Empire during the first decade of the nineteenth century.[2] Some interesting parallels are equally drawn with the *Kulturkampf* in Imperial Germany and, more pertinently, with the struggles of the early Third Republic in France which experienced a fresh bout of religious strife. In both cases anti-clericalism was a, perhaps **the**, unifying force which bound left or liberals together yet also provided the Catholic church with a convincing *raison d'être* in an increasingly secular age.

Subscribers to H-France will, of course, be particularly interested in the Napoleonic dimension and the comparisons to be made with metropolitan France, both implicit and explicit. To a greater extent than the author suggests there are important similarities to be established between Italian religiosity and the baroque piety of the *Midi de la France*. To be sure, Broers is aware of Maurice Agulhon's celebrated work on the penitent fraternities of neighbouring Provence, but he might have pointed to their revival under the Empire, much to the displeasure of the Napoleonic authorities (though the return of congregations, especially for teaching or nursing purposes, was actually encouraged in France).<sup>[3]</sup> Images of lawlessness likewise abounded when northerners confronted violent behaviour in the French as well as Italian zones of the Mediterranean littoral, and one recalls Thibaudeau's recollections of his time as prefect of the Bouches-du-Rhône: "they do not reason here, they raise their fists."<sup>[4]</sup> Nor was such condescension directed solely against Midi or Mezzogiorno; French administrators expressed the same incomprehension when facing the pious (or, as they saw them, deeply superstitious) peasants of the Vendée.

An unyielding hostility towards the church played a bigger role in provoking disaffection from the Napoleonic Empire than most historians have been willing to recognise.<sup>[5]</sup> Religious sentiment was more responsible for undermining French domination than nationalism. The pragmatism that marked the early years of Bonapartist relations with catholicism was progressively abandoned, though it was never much in evidence in Italy. It was one thing for former terrorists such as Hugues Nardon to foam at the mouth when confronted with the "fanaticism" represented by fervent belief in madonnas and miracles, but even more cautious imperial administrators such as Roederer or Tournon were fundamentally unsympathetic to the spiritual as opposed to social aspect of religion. Their quest for martial regeneration to overcome the perceived moral decadence of the priest-ridden Italians stimulated widespread "liturgical resistance," with every Sunday mass providing an occasion to display resistance to the French intruder. Such insensitivity severely damaged the *ralliement* that had been brokered with the notables of the peninsula (one would like to have been told about the impact of sales of church property, the *beni nazionale*, but they go unremarked). Members of the elite returned to the ecclesiastical fold and evinced fresh regard for a religion they had lately begun to despise.

Pope and bishops in Italy were potential allies of Emperor and prefects, who shared a similar concern for order and had mounted earlier efforts to overcome unruly, traditional religious practices that had stubbornly resisted clerical discipline for so long. Yet as a consequence of the Napoleonic onslaught, rightly interpreted as an attack on God, the leaders of the Roman church switched to supporting the very forms of popular devotion they had once viewed with such suspicion; the opportunity to win over these clergy was squandered. Pius VII drew attention to the chasm that separated him from the French when he proclaimed in 1809 that it was a fundamental difference in Weltanschauung, not the mere usurpation of his temporal authority, which prompted him to excommunicate Napoleon. This is a far cry from the view that Napoleon attacked the Pope for dynastic reasons, for his refusal to grant him a divorce and recognize the son provocatively named the "Roi de Rome," acting like some latter day Henry VIII. Just as older views of Tudor religion have been revised, so too must traditional views of Pius as a mere defender of his own privileges, rather than the faith of the Italian masses, be subject to re-examination.

The French model of Gallicanism was not for export, though the imperial authorities wanted to believe that the Alps (like the Pyrenees) were no longer a barrier to the extension of its influence (the results in Spain were just as disastrous). Italy lacked the tradition of a strong centralized state which prevailed in France. Moreover, the Italian church was rather more powerful than its French counterpart and remained a more vibrant, if not entirely healthy, organism. The clergy of the peninsula had not come under such scathing attack: convents and oratories, like confraternities, enjoyed more respect. Ironically Napoleon ended up repeating the revolutionaries' cardinal error when, in 1810, he imposed an oath on the Roman clergy, with the same catastrophic effects as those encountered in France in 1791. This final episode in the demise of imperial religious policy forms the substance of a penultimate chapter in Broers'

book that demonstrates how clerical deportations served to spread disaffection northwards and rendered vain Napoleon's attempts to forge a fresh Concordat with the exiled Pope at Fontainebleau in 1813.

The thesis of this rich study is well argued, and the analysis is delivered with striking detail and vivid examples, yet rather more might have been done to guide the non-specialist reader through some unfamiliar Italian terrain.[6] Surprisingly, there is not a single map to accompany the volume, though the text is peppered with geographical references that shift rapidly from one part of the Italian peninsula to another. Basic information is similarly taken for granted. The French Concordat of 1801 was implemented in the *départements réunis*, but a different document was negotiated with the Republic (then Kingdom) of Italy in 1803 and 1804. Yet there is no description of this Italian Concordat that recognized an established church with rather more status than catholicism ("the religion of the majority") was granted in France itself. Unfortunately, the enquiring reader will not find any assistance in the bibliography, which is restricted to primary sources; the only references to further information lie buried in the copious endnotes. Nor is the index especially helpful (Count Azul Melzi cannot be Francesco Melzi, vice-president of the Italian Republic, who appears on the relevant pages), and there are some irritating slips in the text, such as references to "campinalismo," or to both a René and a Roger Dupuy (the latter a singular authority on the rebel chouans of Brittany).

Yet these criticisms should not detract from a substantial achievement.[7] Besides the grander themes he tackles, Broers broaches some important issues regarding the nature of the Bonapartist project. Having conjured up the specter of Napoleon as enlightened despot—far more radical than his pre-revolutionary predecessors—he comes down in favour of the Emperor as "a Jacobin on horseback." This is surely a more suitable description, certainly in keeping with General Bonaparte's image in Italy after his first incursion into the peninsula during the triennio at the end of the 1790s. Perhaps Broers is right to suggest that the conciliation of the French Concordat was the exception rather than the rule where Napoleonic policy towards the church was concerned, though it remains true that Bonaparte pursued a more revolutionary policy abroad than at home. It is certainly to Broers' credit that, having examined the sinews of imperial authority in previous work, he is willing to acknowledge the limitations of the Napoleonic juggernaut in the ecclesiastical domain. The Italian church, which appeared to be losing authority before the advent of the *epoca francese*, emerged stronger from the conflict. Its combination of passive resistance and compromise with popular piety produced saints who offered a potent alternative to the soldierly *machismo* which the militaristic, Napoleonic Empire sought to inculcate. The French had a positive contribution to make in Italy, yet, like all imperial powers (the current American regime included), their unwillingness to appreciate alien cultural values negated much of the good they sought to achieve. Indeed, their failure in the campaign against Italian religion, Broers suggests in conclusion, led to a defeat on a par with the Russian debacle or the downfall at Waterloo, less bloody but none the less decisive.

## NOTES

[1] M. Broers, *Europe under Napoleon, 1799-1815* (London: Edward Arnold, 1996); and idem, *Napoleonic Imperialism and the Savoyard Monarchy, 1773-1821: State Building in Piedmont* (New York and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1997).

[2] Idem, "Cultural imperialism in a European context? Political culture and cultural politics in Napoleonic Italy," *Past & Present* 160 (2001): 152-180.

[3] M. Agulhon, *Les confréries de pénitents de l'ancienne Provence* (Fayard: Paris, 1968).

[4] C. Lucas, "The Problem of the Midi in the French Revolution," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 28 (1978): 1-25.

[5] N. Aston, *Christianity and Revolutionary Europe, c.1750-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 291 et seq. See also J.-O. Boudon, *Napoléon et les cultes: les religions en Europe à l'aube du XIXe siècle, 1800-1815* (Fayard: Paris, 2002), recently reviewed for H-France and may be viewed at *H-France Review* Vol. 3 (February 2003), No. 13

[6] For a good, brief introduction to the Italian peninsula during this period, see A. Grab "From the French Revolution to Napoleon," in J. Davis, ed., *Italy in the Nineteenth Century 1796-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 25-50.

[7] For a short summary of the central thesis of the book, see M. Broers, "'The War against God': Napoleon, Pope Pius VII and the People of Italy, 1800-1814," *The Historian* 69 (2001): 16-21.

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