

Church, Society and Religious Change in France, 1580-1730

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Over the past 15 years Joseph Bergin has produced two monographs on French bishops which are notable for their ambitious scopes and for their contributions to our understanding of the French Church in the 17th century.⁽¹⁾ His new work *Church, Society and Religious Change in France, 1580–1730* is an even more monumental study that only a scholar with his past achievements could contemplate undertaking. A survey of the French Church and its impact on society over the course of the 17th century must take into account the legacy of the church's long-established roots in France, the substantial regional and local variations in church structures and practices and its sheer ubiquity. Perhaps the most telling sign of the difficulties faced by any scholar seeking to produce such a study is the lack of comparable books in French or English. This reviewer is aware of only one such work, Bernard Hours' *L'église et la vie religieuse dans la France moderne, xvi-xviii siècle*.⁽²⁾ Hours' much shorter work in the 'Collection Premier Cycle' series was intended as a brief introduction for undergraduates to the topic. Bergin's study provides a more substantial survey appropriate for undergraduates, but also much more.

One of the great merits of this book is that at 500 pages it is a sharp, focused study. Considered alongside John McManners' impressive 1700 page survey of the Catholic Church in 18th-century France, one can see that Bergin had to make choices to shorten his account.⁽³⁾ Much of its sharpness derives from Bergin's style. He eschews any effort to be encyclopedic and instead frequent draws upon substantial examples to explore developments. He also deftly tailors his approach to the contours of specific topics, as for instance in chapter nine 'The Triumph of the Parish', where he uses the refurbishment of parish churches to explore changes in religious practice, or chapter seven 'Bishops: Adaptation and Action', which closes with an extended look at the career of one bishop, Michel Le Peletier, to tie the wide-ranging chapter together. The use of substantial examples in conjunction with detailed endnotes provides an admirable balance between a readable text and a more comprehensive guide to further work in the field. Throughout he also succeeds in providing a coherent overview while still acknowledging and where appropriate examining regional variations.

Another key to the book's success is its organization. The work is comprised of a prologue, 16 thematic chapters and a conclusion. Each chapter is broad ranging, often combining topics that are not usually considered together. These thematic chapters can be read separately and provide useful introductions to key components of the French Church and religious practice in the 17th century. But the sum total of these

chapters is much more than the constituent parts. Topics first broached in early chapters are often returned to later in the book, as for instance the regular clergy who are the focus of three early chapters and are also examined in later chapters where their roles are assessed in such areas as pilgrimage, preaching, confraternities, missions and the Jansenist controversies. Taken collectively the chapters explore how and why the Church changed during the long 17th century and how French culture and the structure of the Church limited and shaped change.

The work opens with a prologue that provides the reader with a point of departure in the form of a wide-ranging survey of the Catholic Church during the final decades of the religious wars. 'Part One: Foundations' consists of two chapters. 'From Dioceses to Parishes: The Geography of the French Church' surveys the physical and geographical organization of the church introducing the reader to the regional variations in the Church that often make generalization difficult. 'Wealth into Benefices' surveys the economic foundations of the church with particular emphasis on the extent to which the benefice system defined the church's relationship with French society by embedding families and social groupings in the church, effectively limiting some types of reform or change.

'Part Two: Clerical Worlds in Context' is comprised of four chapters all devoted to the clergy. 'Clerics and Clergy: The World of the Seculars' is a magisterial survey of the secular clergy in all of their varied forms. As one might expect Bergin provides an excellent exploration of bishops and other elite clergy, but perhaps the most impressive portion of the chapter deals with the remarkable variety of unbeneficed clergy and the regional variations within this group. As Bergin notes relatively little is known about these clergy who maintained a substantial presence in localities across France. Nevertheless they are important, making up one of the distinctive features of the 17th-century church that would largely disappear by the 19th century.

The other three chapters in this part are devoted to the regulars. 'The Monastic Orders: Adjustment and Survival' focuses on the monastic regulars that were already firmly established in France by the late Middle Ages. For these orders the 17th century was an important period of expansion through new foundations and of influential reform movements within existing communities. The chapter is most notable for the way that Bergin deftly leads the reader through the bewildering variety of religious orders, reform movements and local circumstances that provide the contours to the monastic experience of the 17th century. The following chapter 'From Mendicants to Congregations' opens with a review of the established mendicant tradition in France with particular emphasis on the ongoing influence of the Franciscans during the 17th century – an important subject considering the much greater attention generally given to new orders and congregations. Bergin then shifts his attention to the Jesuits, before introducing the new institution of secular congregations which broke the mould of older medieval models. He concludes the chapter by exploring the impact at the local level of these varied active religious organizations, no easy task considering their number and the regional variations in their activities. The final chapter of part two entitled 'A Silent Revolution: Women as Regulars' surveys perhaps the most remarkable development among the regular clergy in the 17th century – the explosion in the number of female regulars and lay sisters and their increased and often novel new roles in charitable, educational and pastoral initiatives. Here again, Bergin places these new developments firmly in the context of medieval precedents. In doing so he highlights how extraordinary the flowering of female regular religious life was in 17th-century France.

Bergin muses in his preface that some might view part two as overindulgent because it gives too much prominence to the clergy in his account of the church. I would disagree because collectively these chapters are more than just a survey of different types of clergy. They also explore how the clerical estate interacted with the rest of society and provide an important foundation for the exploration of other topics in the remaining chapters of the book. I would also add that these chapters provide the most accessible introductory survey of the French clergy in all their varied forms that I have encountered. I will certainly be directing my students to this section in the future as they seek to come to terms with this complex and unfamiliar institution.

The two opening parts might best be thought of as providing the foundation for a series of more thematic

essays in parts three through five. 'Part Three: A New Clergy?' focuses on how the substantial and ongoing efforts to improve the clergy and focus religious life in the parish church worked in practice. 'Bishops: Adaptation and Action' explores how bishops established channels of communication through which they sought to better direct religious life in their dioceses. 'Remaking the Secular Clergy' focuses on the wide variety of efforts to shape a more knowledgeable and, in terms of the Church's purposes, competent parish clergy. The chapter is notable for the extent to which it places the emergence of seminaries in the context of other less well documented and understood initiatives, including clerical conferences and efforts to shape the appointment of parish clergy within the benefice system. The picture that emerges in this chapter is one of trial and error that is more complex and nuanced than a long campaign that culminated in the foundation of seminaries. 'The Triumph of the Parish?' examines the efforts to focus religious life in the parish church. It concludes that while there were certainly efforts to reshape the parish church and clergy, success in focusing religious activities in the parish church varied substantially from place to place. It was perhaps least effective in urban centres where regular clergy offered alternative foci for devotion and the parishes themselves were often ill suited to the task of serving parishioner needs. In rural areas the increased focus of religious life in the parish may have been more effective, in part because of sustained pressure by church and secular authorities and in part because of the efforts of parishioners. These three chapters collectively explore the slow and uneven effort to focus religious life in the parish and improve the education and discipline of the parish clergy who were intended, at least within clerical circles, to be the primary source for change in the Church.

'Part Four: Instruments of Religious Change' consists of four chapters that focus on a variety of efforts to improve the basic religious knowledge of the faithful. The first two chapters 'Saints and Shrines' and 'Sacraments and Sinners' consider how the Church sought to shape well-established religious ideas and practices, including the cult of the saints, pilgrimages, processions and the sacraments to inculcate basic religious knowledge in the population. In both chapters Bergin traces the evolution of these ideas and practices through the Middle Ages before exploring how the faithful and church leaders understood and sought to shape them in the 17th century. Local and regional variations make any generalization difficult, but it is clear that church leaders sought to defend late medieval beliefs and practices in part as a response to Protestant challenges even as they sought to rein in those features that they found most troubling. It is also clear that the laity shaped the evolution of these practices and beliefs. In terms of the cult of the saints, the church could point by the 18th century to some success in reining in the most unorthodox beliefs and practices and in channeling some devotional energy into more orthodox activities. In terms of the sacraments, the church's efforts to make them central to religious practice were of mixed success in part because it proved difficult to make clear the difference between the sacraments and other church-sanctioned rituals.

The following two chapters also concern efforts to inculcate the Catholic population with a firm understanding of what the church increasingly viewed as an essential set of beliefs and practices. 'Religion Taught and Learned' explores how preaching, missions, catechism and schools were all used to varying degrees of success to teach the faithful, drawing on earlier chapters to explore the contributions of secular and regular clergy alongside lay initiatives. 'The Forms and Uses of Spirituality' examines spirituality in a broad sense, including both the thought of elite spiritual thinkers from Bérulle to Fénelon and advice books and spiritual works that were widely disseminated among the faithful. Bergin in particular explores the extent to which the works of elite spiritual writers were shaped by actual pastoral experiences and the relationship between elite spiritual writing and more mainstream publications.

'Part Five: Movers and Shakers' examines in turn confraternities, *Dévots* and Jansenists as key agents of change in France. As its title implies 'The Many Faces of the Confraternities' explores the remarkable number and variety of confraternities, sodalities and congregations that collectively brought new spiritual beliefs and practices to significant numbers of the faithful. While one important conclusion of the chapter is that further research on the topic is required, it is also clear that this long-established form of religious association flowered in a variety of ways over the course of the seventeenth century having an important impact on the dissemination of new religious ideas. '*Dévots*: The Pious and the Militant' focuses on the

evolution of the *Dévo*t movement over the course of the 17th century, with particular focus on the secretive Company of the Holy Sacrament. The chapter emphasizes the importance of action among *Dév*ots whether in large scale organizations like the Holy Sacrament or later in the century in supporting local catechism and elementary school initiatives. In this chapter Bergin emphasizes that while the primary purpose of many *Dév*ots may have been action, the devotional culture of the group made much of this activity possible. The final chapter ‘Jansenists: Dissidents but also Militants’ provides a clear summary of this notoriously complex and difficult to define movement. Bergin emphasizes that Jansenism is in many ways a term of convenience because it ‘went through numerous stages of development and accretion, making it extremely difficult to use a single term to describe it at any one point in its history.’ (p. 422) Collectively these chapters show that while the most active participants in many of these initiatives were elites, they drew on religious ideas that had wider support in society.

Bergin’s conclusion broadens out his survey by describing the Catholic Reformation in France as one that began relatively late but lasted longer than in other regions of Catholic Europe. He also takes the opportunity to view the movement as a whole, emphasizing that it did not follow a steady trajectory, rather being punctuated over its course by a series of developments that channeled new energy into the movement. The conclusion also places the French church and its reform movements in a broader European perspective, with particular emphasis on its influence on religious thought and practice in other regions of Catholic Europe.

One critical aspect of the Catholic Church in France – its role in the political life of the kingdom— is largely absent from these chapters. Bergin, of course, is fully aware of the important role of the church in French political life as his earlier studies of Richelieu and de la Rochefoucauld show.⁽⁴⁾ But, as the title of this work implies, Bergin consciously chose to put the political role of the Church to one side, in large part to make this ambitious undertaking possible. In reality, the political roles of the Church are present as no account of Jansenism, the religious wars or the bishops of France could completely ignore political issues. What Bergin has done is consciously choose not to focus on the Church’s role in politics. This is a decision that some might regret, but Bergin hints in his prologue that he may produce a separate volume on this topic – another monumental task that I hope he takes on. Like politics, the Huguenots also receive attention only in so much as they inspired Catholic missions and missionary societies. While clearly not central to a survey of the Catholic Church, some readers might have hoped for a more sustained consideration of how the Huguenot presence shaped Catholic identity in the 17th century. But it is conscious decisions to place some issues like politics and the Huguenots in the background that make this book such a focused and readable survey.

There is no question that this book is an important and welcome addition to the field. Indeed, I wish that as a graduate student I had possessed a copy. It is not a book that seeks to fundamentally change our understanding of the Church. Rather it offers a clear survey of the church in its many manifestations and forms. It is a survey that focuses on changes over 150 years, even as it recognizes the powerful forces of continuity that also defined the period. At the same time it is much more than a survey. It provides a useful assessment of the field as a whole and a guide to where further research is needed. Throughout Bergin takes the opportunity to highlight lacunae in current scholarship. At numerous points in the text he notes that his conclusions can only be provisional, including his assessment of the widely varying impacts of religious orders on French society or the role of unbeneficed clerics in local religious life. Other gaps become apparent through the relative lack of references in the book to important regions as Bergin relies on those regions for which studies exist. It is clear that we understand far more about some regions of France than others. Thus this book is more than just a survey, it also provides a guide to where further research will transform our understanding of the French Church.

Notes

1. J. Bergin, *The Making of the French Episcopate 1589–1661* (Yale, 1996); J. Bergin, *Crown, Church and Episcopate under Louis XIV* (Yale, 2004). [Back to \(1\)](#)

2. B. Hours, *L'Eglise et la vie religieuse dans la France moderne, xvi^e-xviii^e siècle* (Paris, 2000).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. J. McManners, *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France* (2 vols., Oxford, 1998).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. J. Bergin, *Cardinal Richelieu: Power and the Pursuit of Wealth* (Yale, 1985); J. Bergin, *Cardinal de la Rochefoucauld: Leadership and Reform in the French Church* (Yale, 1987); J. Bergin, *The Rise of Richelieu* (Yale, 1991).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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