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Edited by William J. Callahan and David Higgs

Excerpt

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1 Introduction

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The eighteenth century witnessed the final flowering of the reforming efforts of the Counter-Reformation, but it also saw deep cracks appear in the facade of the traditional alliance of throne, altar and orthodox belief. These rifts have often been explained by the development of an intellectual movement, the Enlightenment, which displayed hostility both to the institutional church and even to the practices of traditional Christianity. The struggle between reforming states and the church over the use of ecclesiastical wealth, the extreme differences between the high and low clergy, the growing tension between the extravagances of baroque popular piety and simpler forms of religious expression, the inequalities of an archaic organization, the uneven distribution of resources between the urban and rural church, all pointed to the beginnings of a crisis within the church and between it and the larger society.

The historiography of the church is, of course, extensive. The shelves of libraries are heavy with studies of bishops, seminaries, religious orders, relations between church and state and the analysis of theological disputes. Members of the church have studied its history with careful detail and much of their work is of considerable merit. In France, A. Schaer's work on the Alsatian clergy, in Spain, López Ferreiro's well-documented history of the archdiocese of Santiago, are examples of the solidity of clerical scholarship. But many of these works, though valuable for the information they provide on the operation of ecclesiastical institutions, neglect the problem of the relationship of the church to the wider society. New departures in the study of the church emerged before the Second World War and from within the church itself. The obvious decline in religious practice, especially in France, led clerics to ask the question why it was taking place. Many realized that simple moral explanations of religious behaviour were inadequate. There developed a demand for analysis informed by the social sciences, particularly sociology. This new approach owes its greatest debt to Gabriel Le Bras, a French sociologist and historian, who stressed the necessity of studying those who worship and why they did so in contrast to the traditional emphasis on the history of ecclesiastical institutions. Le Bras's work, first published in the 1930s, was to lead to a flourishing discipline of religious sociology in the

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countries of Catholic Europe. The efforts of Canon Boulard in France, J. M. Vázquez and R. Duocastella in Spain, attest to his widespread influence. The Le Bras approach, though stressing the historical background to religious problems, focuses attention on the crisis of belief and the incidence of observance in the contemporary world. But its emphasis on sociological investigation has stimulated historians to look at the church from a new vantage point. The place of the church within society and religious behaviour in the past are seen as legitimate objects of scholarly enquiry separate from the historian's personal beliefs or the problem of religion in the modern world.

Current research on the religious history of eighteenth-century Europe varies from one country to another. Progress has been greatest in France where an abundant monographic literature has provided the foundation of a recent innovative historiography of religion. Maurice Agulhon has investigated the confraternities of eighteenth-century Provence and their relation to the social life of the times; Michel Vovelle has analysed the content of wills in Provence to trace the rise and decline of religious sentiment during the century. Southern Europe has been less well served, but in Italy the pioneering work of Candeloro Giorgini on Tuscany, Guisepe Orlandi on Modena and Gabriele de Rosa on the south reflect the new trends. For Spain, the monographic literature has been growing. The work of Saugnieux and Appolis on Jansenism, Olaechea on church-state relations, and Batllori on the Jesuit exiles are signs of serious scholarly interest in the history of the Spanish church, and the recently published *Diccionario de historia eclesiástica* with a broad range of articles on such problems as ecclesiastical demography promises further advances. In central and eastern Europe, Grete Klingenstein and others have done work on the German and Austrian churches, while Jerzy Kłoczowski and his colleagues at the Institute of Ecclesiastical Studies at the Catholic University of Lublin have published important studies on the socio-religious history of Poland.

The essays in this volume, though national in focus, deal with a series of general problems significant to understanding the place of the church within society. The social role of Catholicism, for example, has often been linked to the study of the recruitment of the clergy. Although theology taught that all members of the church from pope to peasant would stand one day on equal footing before the judgement seat, the church of this world possessed an elaborate organization which mirrored the complexities of the Old Regime's social structure. Cardinals, archbishops, bishops and cathedral canons formed an elite whose wealth and prestige rivalled the nobility's in civil society. The study of episcopal recruitment is valuable for analysis of the relationship between the secular and ecclesiastical worlds. The stereotype of the cultivated, aristocratic bishop of the eighteenth century has worked its way into countless textbooks. The reality was more complex. In France, it is true, the aristocracy monopolized high church office just as it dominated social life

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and the officer corps. Elsewhere, the situation, reflecting the peculiarities of each nation, was mixed. Jean Meyer in a recent study of the eighteenth-century European nobility has stressed the importance of the numerous and relatively poor nobles of northern Spain, Hungary and Poland. This genteel, impoverished nobility found clerical service an acceptable occupation for its sons. In Spain and Portugal, lesser nobles formed the majority of the episcopacy at any given moment. In Italy, aristocrats dominated the hierarchy in Naples, Venice and Piedmont but their numbers declined in the Papal States in favour of ecclesiastical bureaucrats. In central and eastern Europe, the nobility dominated the wealthiest sees such as Salzburg, Estergom and Gniezno.

The faithful found few noble priests at the centre of the church's life, the parish. Its place as a basic unit of society is evident. The parish served as a vehicle for making the desires of government known to local populations; it was often the first link in the chain of authority running from village to royal council. Social life at the parochial level revolved around the festivals of an elaborate liturgical calendar. For the peasantry, parish membership furnished an identity against the outside world.

Despite the importance of the parish priest to the life of the church, the existence of an underpaid, often ill-prepared and unevenly distributed parochial clergy prevented the church from conducting an effective pastoral mission, although this was not always true. The clergy and the parish functioned well in France, in contrast to Spain where thousands of parishes lacked priests; Italy, where an archaic parish structure blocked attempts to serve an expanding population; and Poland, where the relative poverty of the church created large and inefficient parishes. In Hungary, new parishes were created in districts such as that around the River Temes recently freed from Turkish rule, while in Austria the resources of the more than 700 monasteries and convents closed by Emperor Joseph II permitted the establishment of more parishes, as in Lower Austria where 231 were founded. Everywhere parish priests were predominantly commoners, often from towns where grammar schools and local monasteries provided the foundation of clerical education. In France and Poland, parish priests even in the countryside came from modest urban families. There is little evidence for the Iberian peninsula, although there are indications that the better-off peasantry provided some priests in rural Portugal. But nowhere did the very poor enter the clergy.

The education of parish priests left much to be desired. The need for improved professional training of the clergy particularly concerned Benedict XIII (1724–30), who encouraged the foundation of new seminaries. The eighteenth-century episcopacy had the same high expectations of education shared by eighteenth-century bureaucrats everywhere. The location of seminaries at the beginning and the end of the century shows the substantial progress accomplished, although there were setbacks. In the Austria of Joseph

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II, for example, small seminaries were closed in favour of a handful of general seminaries. Improvements in clerical instruction and the related campaign promoting spiritual conferences for the clergy revealed the continuing preoccupation of the church's leadership with improving the intellectual quality of the priesthood.

These efforts produced disappointing results in the view of the hierarchy. Confidence in educational improvement was clearly misplaced. The real problem was the unequal distribution of the church's material resources. The archbishops of Braga, Toledo, Rheims, Venice, Salzburg and Gniezno enjoyed handsome revenues; many of their parish priests eked out a bare living. The inadequate income of the parish clergy was a serious problem in many countries.

The poverty of the rural clergy illustrates the most serious weakness of the eighteenth-century church. Its wealth, power and prestige rested not in the countryside where the majority of the population lived and worked but in the cities. In an overwhelmingly rural society, the church was urban. Diocesan seats, cathedral chapters, charitable and educational foundations abounded in the cities. There too the religious orders established their houses. The successful cleric of the eighteenth century was above all an urban man who had studied in a university and obtained livings in important towns. The rural priest, perhaps educated in a seminary, faced a lifetime of hardship and little or no advancement. The immense wealth of the church remained in the ecclesiastical capitals. Although there is abundant evidence of the administrative abilities and good intentions of the majority of the bishops, the concentration of ecclesiastical riches and talent in the cities constituted a glaring weakness never overcome.

This wealth did not lie idle. The supreme achievements of Counter-Reformation architecture distracted notice to some extent from ecclesiastical building in the eighteenth century. As well as the construction of great basilicas and monasteries, especially in central Europe, there was everywhere a wave of church building. The increasing level of luxury with which large segments of the European population were familiar was first displayed in ecclesiastical buildings. The refinement of decoration, the use of elaborate gilding, painting and fine liturgical vessels was characteristic of the century. These efforts in *arts appliqués* were not solely restricted to churches; there was a parallel demand for the application of the same decorative techniques (and often from the same artisans and craftsmen) for *Schloss* and townhouse. However, clerical patronage always provided a powerful stimulus to the luxury crafts. This is most obvious in celebrated commissions given to artists, like those to A. Canova to sculpt the tombs of Clement XIII and Clement XIV. An interest in the fine arts was displayed at the highest levels of the hierarchy: Benedict XIV charged Winckelmann to establish the Vatican Museum of Antiquities. Still more eloquent testimony to the general increase of opulence

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were the numerous commissions given by the clergy for the embellishment of churches, chapels and local shrines throughout Europe. Whether in Beja, Santiago de Compostela, Florence, Breslau or Estergom, communities of silversmiths, embroiderers, carpenters, roofers, candle-makers and a host of others depended on the expenditure of bishops, monasteries and cathedral chapters.

The funnelling of clerical revenues into the towns served another purpose: it made the church in ecclesiastical centres the single most important consumer and the principal source of charity for the masses of impoverished produced by the fragile agrarian economy of the Old Regime. The church provided the equivalent of the modern state's spending on public works in societies where chronic unemployment was a fact of life. There is no doubt that the charity distributed to the poor by the church did not resolve the problem of massive poverty in eighteenth-century Europe, and that the alms dispensed by the devout often flowed to the indigent in an inefficient and haphazard stream. But the church and its institutions – the parish, monastery, hospital and charitable foundation – were the major sources of social welfare during the Old Regime. How much of the church's wealth went into charity is impossible to say, but the efforts of ecclesiastical institutions contributed to the hold of the church over the mass of the population. Expenditures on charity compensated in part for the immense sums spent on church building and decoration. The declining charitable role of the church in western Europe, and there are indications of this beginning in the second half of the century, signalled a change in the relationship between church and people.

The wealth financing the great facade of the basilica of Santiago de Compostela, the church-monastery of Mafra, the splendid baroque monastery of Melk and a multitude of hospitals, orphanages and asylums came primarily from the land. The urban church of the eighteenth century supported itself on income from ecclesiastical properties in the countryside and the tithe. The church was perhaps more visible in the countryside as a landowner and tithe-gatherer than as a dispenser of spiritual comfort. Clerical land-holdings varied in extent depending on the region and country. By 1714 the church had acquired one-sixteenth of the land area of Bohemia, one-twentieth of the land of the region of Toulouse, and so on. During the second half of the century a decline in ecclesiastical property-holding took place as the result of expulsion of the Jesuits, whose land and endowments were taken over by governments, although often for religious purposes. More serious was the attack carried out in Austria and the Habsburg dominions of Italy during the rule of Maria Theresa and Joseph II. In Austria alone 738 religious houses were closed in the 1780s. Moreover, governments sought through legislation to prevent the accumulation of property in ecclesiastical hands. In spite of these measures, church property remained essentially unchanged in most states of Catholic

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Europe until the massive sale of ecclesiastical lands which took place in France during the Revolution.

The relationship of the church to the economics of rural society is vital to an understanding of its social role. The nature of the relationship was determined by regional conditions. In areas where the church possessed substantial property – southern Iberia and Italy, for example – its social ties to the local population differed from those in districts of peasant ownership such as northern Portugal, the Basque Provinces, Brittany, or Poland. In certain areas the ability of the church to maintain its following among the rural masses may well have been due to the lesser presence of the church as landowner.

Imposing in wealth, internal organization and education, the eighteenth-century church laboured to fulfil its primary mission, to save the souls of its members. The problem of assessing the quality and incidence of religious practice during the Old Regime, however, is immense. The historian would like to see maps drawn of the main features of European Catholicism to show the similarities and differences in ritual and belief across Europe. We are still poorly served in this regard, although historical geographers are now turning to the task. Pierre Deffontaines in his highly general but inventive work on the geography of religion took as a departure point the impact of religion on the geography of population distribution. The *Atlas zur Kirchengeschichte* edited by Jochen Martin, the religious maps of the *Atlante storico italiano dell'età moderna* and the articles on the subject published by the *Miscellanea historiae ecclesiasticae* of Louvain show the insights offered to historians by cartography. Comparative maps over time of the incidence of pilgrimages, feasts, festivals, seminaries, new religious building, vocations and so on may point us towards regional explanations of these features. Indeed, the mid-twentieth-century map of 'messalisants adultes par diocèse' of western Europe drawn up by Canon Boulard and his collaborators provides a map of contrasting levels of religious practice. Did this have its origin in the Counter-Reformation? Recent work on the religious sociology of France suggests that the modern pattern of observance running from Brittany, Normandy through eastern France to Alsace and Franche Comté was already forming during the eighteenth century. It may be that the areas which were most recalcitrant to post-Tridentine reform were those which subsequently remained most faithful to the church, just as those parts of France where reforms were more easily accepted by clergy and the laity became the first to show signs of dechristianization. The present day low incidence of practice in the Portuguese Alentejo and in Andalusia, both areas of large estates and impoverished rural populations, can be traced in part to a simpler cause, the pastoral neglect of country districts already evident during the eighteenth century. The parishes of southern Spain, for example, were extremely large and ineffective compared to those in the north. The questions raised by a cartography of ritual, belief and even more by something as diffuse as resistance to reform, are evident enough.

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The practices of popular religion contributed to the influence of the church over the urban and rural masses. Clerical laments about ignorance of the basic truths of the faith were commonplace. Indeed, for the vast majority of the population, religion combined colourful ceremony, the appeasement of divine wrath and folkloric custom. However distressed ecclesiastics were by popular religious practice, the novenas, processions, confraternities, pilgrimages and devotions formed the basis of piety which made religion an integral part of daily life. Toward the close of the century there were indications that the traditional instruments of popular religion were beginning to lose favour, particularly in urban centres. The *Bruderschaften* of south German towns often fell under municipal control and thus had an incipient independence of the clergy which may have been heightened in the atmosphere of the *Aufklärung*. The *irmandades* of Portugal, the confraternities of Italy, and parallel forms elsewhere appeared originally to offer an excellent vehicle for clerical guidance and control of popular religious life, but they may well have been a nursery for secular associations. Agulhon's study of Provençal confraternities, those pious associations of laymen found everywhere in Catholic Europe, revealed a marked decline in their religious vitality during the eighteenth century. A similar pattern developed in Seville and Gerona among confraternities of artisans, and in Lombardy and Tuscany the number of confraternities fell over the course of the century. The confraternity, essential to lay participation in the elaborate ritualism of the church as well as to local sociability, may have declined during the urban expansion of the eighteenth century. Economic changes and the flow of rural migrants into the towns made the traditional forms of religious association outmoded and less effective.

The distinction between the Catholicism of the elite and popular religion has a further dimension as a result of the importance of magic. Recent scholarly interest in this topic has been most evident for north-western Europe in the seventeenth century and for non-European peoples in the twentieth. In Catholic Europe of the eighteenth century belief in necromancers and witches was far from vanquished, although the educated of France and Germany showed scepticism and contempt for the reality of magic, that 'deliberate production (or attempted production) of physical effects or the gaining of knowledge by means which were regarded as occult or supernatural' (K. Thomas). Yet if the number of witch trials plummeted, this did not mean the clergy could assume that magical beliefs no longer existed. Indeed, the concern with destroying belief in the powers of sorcerers and witches was widespread among the clergy who were themselves sometimes accused of deforming Catholic rituals for magical purposes. Belief in supernatural powers was still common among the peasantry. If religion in the formal sense was intercessory and magic was coercive, much popular religion was perilously close to an attempt to coerce intercession. The idea that fervent devotionism could produce results in non-religious aspects of life was common. There seems to be

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some linkage between what Michel Vovelle has termed baroque Catholicism, characterized by numerous masses for the dead and elaborate funeral processions, ostentatious expenditures on ritual objects, ex-votos and candles, and the persistence of belief in magical powers.

Increasing emphasis on devotionism in the eighteenth century showed the desire of the clergy to use affection for specific rituals and intercessional worship as a means of deepening religious sentiment without the dangers inherent in the practices of popular religion or in uncontrolled flights of personal piety. The eighteenth century witnessed the spread of devotions such as the Sacred Heart and the Stations of the Cross which provided the basis for a new popular religion directed by the church itself. In many states the episcopacy, trained to abhor the dark side of popular religion based on shrines and the magical qualities often attached to statues, relics, fountains, rocks and other features of the natural landscape, tried to suppress these practices in favour of the new devotions. The religious orders, particularly those engaged in missionary activity, were the most important instruments for spreading clerically directed piety. The Sacred Heart, first popularized in France by St John Eudes (1601–81), became a favourite devotion of the Jesuits who promoted it throughout Europe in their missions. The Capuchins encouraged the Stations of the Cross in their missions, while the Redemptorists, an order founded by the most effective exponent of the new piety, St Alphonsus Liguori, promoted devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help. These practices, however, did not displace the primitive appeal of traditional popular religion, as shrines, pilgrimages, and curious rituals existed alongside the devotions created by the church.

Popular religion suffered also from the attacks of reform-minded clergy intent upon purifying the liturgy and providing the masses with at least a rudimentary knowledge of the basic truths of religion. Though often described as Jansenist, the clerical reformers conformed to the official doctrinal orthodoxy of the church. They insistently called for a purer, interior religion to replace what seemed to them to be the superstitions of popular religion. This 'Enlightened Catholicism' found supporters everywhere: Bishops Climent and Tavira in Spain, Ricci in Italy, Dillon in France, were all examples of the reforming impulse that was felt within the church during the second half of the century. The establishment of new seminaries, the burgeoning number of spiritual conferences for the clergy and, above all, the vigorous evangelizing missions of the religious orders testified to the reality of the reforming movement.

Since the Council of Trent the church had relied upon groups of priests, drawn generally from the regular clergy, to revive religious fervour and spread knowledge of sound doctrines through popular missions. The evangelizing campaigns of the eighteenth century produced a number of extraordinary figures whose instinctive grasp of mass psychology produced highly effective

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preachers. St Alphonsus Liguori (1696–1787) founded the Redemptorists in 1732, and the order soon proved its worth in southern Italy as did the Passionists established by St Paul Francis Danei in 1720. Elsewhere missionary activity was carried on by the Jesuits and Vincentians (France and Poland) and by the Capuchins and Jesuits (Spain) with the Redemptorists active in several lands. The religious orders involved in missionary work improved preaching and evangelizing techniques in contrast to the more traditional reliance on extravagant and sometimes incomprehensible sermons. The missions themselves were exercises as carefully prepared as those of any modern evangelist. How effectively they achieved their goal of deepening religious sensibilities among the illiterate is difficult to say, but there is some evidence that the missions served as a mechanism for halting the slippage of faith among the rural population.

Internal reform preached by the episcopacy and the evangelization of the masses carried out by the religious orders revealed the vitality of the eighteenth-century church. But the reforming effort failed to penetrate deeply enough to produce a general movement of transformation similar to the Counter-Reformation of the sixteenth century. Improved clerical education and the zeal of domestic missionaries, though partially successful, did not halt the decline of religious practice in areas where it had already begun nor did it replace religion based on the devotions of popular piety with the pastoral and spiritual faith demanded by the reformers. And except in a few cases – the reform of the Austrian church by Joseph II and the Tuscan by Scipione de' Ricci, for example – no serious attempt was made to alter the church's archaic and imbalanced administrative and financial structure. And there were other danger signs. A decline in religious vocations took place in every country after a period of expansion during the first half of the century. In Italy, the number of priests fell due to the pressure of government reformers on the religious orders in Lombardy–Tuscany, but even in Naples the secular clergy declined by twenty-one per cent between 1773 and 1801. In Spain, the decline was less noticeable for the secular clergy and the mendicant orders but was marked among the great monastic foundations: the Benedictines, Carthusians, Cistercians, etc. The near collapse of the monastic orders occurred elsewhere as well.

The life of the church was everywhere affected by the changing character of relations between the state and Rome. The struggle, almost as old as Christianity itself, took on new dimensions during the eighteenth century as the balance between states and the papacy shifted in the former's favour. There were still areas, to be sure, where the temporal power of the church was evident, starting with the Papal States. In the Germanies there had been a decline in the number of *Geistlichen Staaten* from the Reformation until the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire at the dawn of the nineteenth century, although the great north German bastions of Catholicism, Münster, Trier and Würzburg, continued to enjoy a certain importance.

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The eighteenth-century papacy proved unable to resist the pressure brought to bear by governments staffed by bureaucrats intent on extending secular control over the internal affairs of the church even at the level of religious practice and discipline. States first sought to expand the traditional right of patronage over ecclesiastical appointments. Between 1740 and 1760 the governments of Portugal, Sardinia, Naples and Spain acquired for all practical purposes the right of appointment to the most important and lucrative benefices. In many lands, governments succeeded in tapping church revenues for secular purposes. Although doctrinal ties between local churches and Rome continued, monarchs everywhere worked toward the creation of what were in effect 'royal' churches subordinate to the state in almost every aspect of their temporal administration, even Frederick the Great, who insisted on exercising the right of patronage over the church in Catholic Silesia. Nor were the prince-bishops of Germany averse to extending their authority at the expense of Rome. Moreover, in the age of Enlightenment the rulers of Catholic Europe used the church to promote schemes for social and economic improvements. Whether in the Portugal of Pombal or the Austria of Joseph II, priests, especially the secular clergy, were seen as agents of the state advancing material progress, improving education, building public works and in general promoting in their dioceses and parishes the utilitarian policies enunciated by the absolutist states. The degree to which churches became 'royal' varied from state to state. It was most feeble in Poland because of the weakness of the national state. It was strongest in the Austria of Joseph II and in the duchy of Tuscany under the Emperor's brother, Leopold, where the state came closest to realizing the idea of a royal church serving temporal as well as spiritual interests. Joseph's closing of more than 700 monasteries and the subsequent use of their property to finance new parishes and central seminaries constituted an attack so direct on the traditional ecclesiastical structure of the Austrian church that Pope Pius VI took the unheard of step of journeying to Vienna in 1782 in the hope of restraining the Emperor from further measures. But in 1786 Joseph's younger brother, Grand Duke Leopold of Tuscany, encouraged the convocation by the reforming bishop of Pistoia, Scipione de' Ricci, of a diocesan synod which sought to strengthen episcopal authority vis-à-vis the papacy, purify the liturgy and limit the growth of the religious orders.

Between 1750 and 1790 the states of Catholic Europe achieved a degree of control over their respective churches never attained before. Rulers appointed bishops, founded seminaries and regulated church discipline. But the triumph of 'royal' churches did not rest on solid foundations. A weak papacy could not halt the progressive extension of state control over the church, but doctrinal ties and an undercurrent of sympathy for Rome among some clerics maintained a measure of papal influence which appeared to offer a counter-weight to the seemingly insatiable demands of secular governments. In Spain during