

The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France. Elizabeth Rapley. *Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990, Pp. 283 hardcover.*

The past decade has witnessed a proliferation of works on the place and participation of women in the reformed church of early modern Europe. It has become commonplace to argue that the new sects offered an equality, or at least an improved position, for women, which the post-Tridentine Catholic church continued steadfastly to refuse them, and that these factors account in large part for the popularity of the reformed religion among women of all ranks. In her study of the seventeenth-century Gallican church, Elizabeth Rapley successfully challenges this school of thought. She suggests that, on the contrary, the church of the Counter-Reformation, albeit sometimes despite its own efforts to the contrary, came to offer Catholic women greater opportunity to participate in the religious life than has hitherto been recognised. The possibility of breaching the walls of a traditionally male-dominated institution led to a dramatic increase in the number of women leading the religious life; more important, it had as an important consequence the introduction of women to the teaching profession in France, as well as to the apostolate of the church itself.

Dr. Rapley's book represents in itself a breaching of several long-held notions regarding the church in the seventeenth century. Her chief aim is to prove that the changing place of women in the Catholic church was not merely the result of what historians used to call "providence," and more recently referred to as a *conjoncture* of events and forces, but rather that pious women, the so-called *dévotés*, were themselves the active agents of change. In Dr. Rapley's view, "The religious energy of the women came first and the need to channel that energy into meaningful action came second." Women's conscious and deliberate efforts to participate more fully in the active life of the church was met with firm resistance on the part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy but, by the end of the seventeenth century, the Gallican church and French society in general enjoyed immense benefits from the work in hospitals, orphanages and schools of both cloistered nuns and women associated with the several recently founded congregations. In effect, in the course of the century, the church became "feminized," and a whole new structure of essential social services was

created upon which the French government, even in the post-revolutionary period, came to depend.

Dr. Rapley argues for two distinct phases in this feminization of the church. The first "rush" of women into the religious life occurred between the end of the deliberations of the Council of Trent in 1563, continuing well into the seventeenth century, and the second around the year 1660. The latter, however, proved in essence to be a "hidden revolution," for it took the *dévotés* not into the cloisters as nuns, but out into the world, as servants of, and helpers in, French communities, large and small. Although church authorities remained deeply suspicious of these *filles séculières*, with their semi-formal vows and their quasi-religious habits, and continued to exalt the contemplative life of the monastery, they also acknowledged the crucial part these women played in the continued existence of the Catholic faith.

Conservatism and traditionalism, however, were potent enemies. Dr. Rapley identifies several distinct periods in the history of the new women's religious congregations. The first communities of *dévotés* drew their inspiration from the *béguines* of the late medieval period: they not only wished to live a pious life, but also to work in the world tending the sick, feeding the poor and, above all — and most onerously as far as the church was concerned — preaching the Gospel. Congregations such as the English Ladies and the sisters of the Visitation modelled themselves on the Jesuits of their day, and gave priority to their missionary efforts to win Huguenots back to the Catholic fold. The church hierarchy, however, mindful of the strict rulings of the Council of Trent, was utterly unwilling to accept either the overthrow of the rule of clausura (which required religious women to remain isolated in their monasteries) or the possibility of a feminine apostolate. By 1631, the status quo had triumphed: the English Ladies had been condemned as "Jesuitesses" and suppressed, and the two Visitation convents had been erected into monasteries whose members lived a reclusive life under the rule of St. Augustine.

While church dogma remained conservative and backward looking, ecclesiastical officials were keenly aware of the need to educate their flocks; indeed, by the second quarter of the seventeenth century, they had come to accept, however reluctantly, that the future of the Catholic religion in a France deeply infected with

Protestant heresy lay in the education of its children. The realisation that education must take precedence over strict observance of Tridentine reforms paved the way for the introduction of women, in a limited fashion, to the instruction of young girls, and so to the rise of the tremendously successful congregations of Notre Dame and Sainte-Ursule. By 1640, these orders counted many hundreds of members whose chief task was education but who, by extension, had come also to act as catechists; church authorities, moreover, had come to acknowledge openly the beneficial effects of their endeavours. A limited share in the apostolate, however, was achieved only at what the founders of the Congregation of Notre Dame and the Ursulines considered a high cost: clausura and the acceptance of formal holy vows. Schools run by the *congrégées* might accept for instruction only girls destined for the veil and day girls, and the nuns must remain as separate from their lay charges as possible.

Real and significant change in the role of women in the active religious life came only in mid-century, largely thanks to the efforts of a single man, Vincent de Paul. Monsieur Vincent, while deeply devout, nevertheless believed wholeheartedly that the activities of religious women must not be confined to the cloisters. Under his leadership, and often in opposition to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, there rose to prominence in France a whole new feminine religious: the *fille séculière*, deeply devout, unmarried, free to move in and about the world as a servant of the church. The period after 1660 witnessed a tremendous surge in the demand for the services these women provided in hospitals, orphanages and hôtels-Dieu, in tiny villages as well as large urban centres. Increasingly, the *filles séculières* also became involved in charitable schools at the parish level, where they offered an alternative to the monastery schools. In the French colony of Montreal, in particular, they came to supplement and complement virtually all the services the priesthood provided, and colonial governors repeatedly acknowledged their essential role in the wilds of New France. Acting as the "proletarian class" of the Catholic church, these women earned their own wages and succeeded, in large part, in making their organizations economically self-sufficient. New *congrégations* proliferated from 1660 to 1700. The older monasteries, by contrast, simultaneously experienced a marked decline in new entrants.

The introduction of the *filles séculières* into the secular world of seventeenth-century hospitals and

schools was, nonetheless, fraught with difficulty. Bishops and archbishops, who lost the jurisdiction over the congregations which they continued to exercise over the monasteries, regarded the new foundations with jealous eyes. Traditionalists within the church continued to decry the impropriety of abandoning the rules of clausura and of introducing women to the apostolate. However, the supporters of the active life, men such as Vincent de Paul, Pierre Fourier and Nicolas Barré, were equally steadfast in their insistence that the functions the *filles séculières* performed were so essential as to override strict adherence to religious observance. By the late seventeenth century, the secular government had come to agree with the latter, and the role of women in the teaching and nursing professions was henceforth assured.

Dr. Rapley's presentation of the several stages through which the religious devotion of women was given expression in seventeenth-century France is clearly and strongly accomplished in a book that is beautifully and sympathetically written. In the course of the century, devout women gained access to active participation in a broad range of social services, often in direct opposition to the men who dominated the dogma and practice of a conservative church; in the process, they forced the church to reconsider its views on the place of women in religion. However, Dr. Rapley falls short of some of her stated aims. Although she demonstrates convincingly that several of the congregations of *filles séculières* were spontaneously formed before they acquired founders or lodgings and rules by which to live, she acknowledges that the church's formal recognition of the new congregations — in short, recognition of their status at canon law — was almost universally granted only under the sustained pressure of influential male *dévots*, such as Vincent de Paul and Nicolas Barré, who in turn sought the assistance of their political patrons. Pious women played leading roles in the genesis of the new organizations, but they could not have prospered as they did without the intervention of members of the established church hierarchy.

More seriously, Dr. Rapley's views on the changing nature of social services in later seventeenth-century France are not altogether sound. The problems the vagrancy and widespread poverty posed in the France of Louis XIV are well known to historians, and the formulation of theories to account for the causes as well as the consequences of massive social disruption

have occupied them for some years. Dr. Rapley here offers a variation on one of these theories. She notes that there existed two approaches to public assistance: one which regarded poverty as a danger and so treated it as deserving of punishment, and another which viewed the evils of vagrancy and poverty more compassionately, as vehicles through which Christian charity might be given meaningful expression. The first approach she suggests characterised social policies advocated by men, while the second became the particular and exclusive concern of women. According to this theory, feminine devotion created an outlet for its fervour in the hospitals, orphanages and charity schools so effectively and successfully staffed by the *filles séculières*. Royal and municipal governments, in turn, became the willing beneficiaries of the work of these *dévotés*.

Dr. Rapley argues her point unconvincingly. A more accurate — if ironic — explanation for the noticeable participation of lay women in the provision of social services would suggest a *conjoncture* of several different but related developments, which together created a demand for lay workers in fields once dominated exclusively by the more traditional monastic orders. Among these developments were the assumptions of vigorous personal rule by Louis XIV, the increased expenditure of public funds in military rather than social ventures, and the determination on the part of municipalities to be free of the burden of supporting formal religious communities within their precincts. Amidst such shifting conditions, devout lay women were presented with a greater opportunity than ever before to provide essential, meaningful and, by contemporary standards, inexpensive social services. The real achievement of women such as Mademoiselle Le Gras, foundress of the Filles de la Charité, is that they were sufficiently gifted and far-seeing to take advantage of those opportunities.

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Women and Industrialization: Gender at Work in Nineteenth-Century England. Judy Lown. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990, Pp. 260 hardcover.

"Gender at work," the subtitle of this book, has a significant double meaning. Judy Lown illustrates how,

at the level of practical experience, being female or male shaped a worker's experience of the silk trade in Victorian Essex. At the same time, she demonstrates that gender — as a category of analysis — informs the structure of an industry and a community. The book is a detailed examination of an important nineteenth-century textile industry, silkmaking, in the family firm of Courtauld's in Halstead, Essex in East Anglia. However, Lown uses her historical study as a starting point for a theoretical reflection on the question of patriarchy.

Women and Industrialization begins with a look at the way the silkmaking trade was organized during the fourteenth century craft phase, in the eighteenth century when capitalistic production was located in the workers' homes within a domestic putting-out system and, finally, in the nineteenth century, when silk was made in factories. For each era, Lown stresses the sexual division of labour in the several forms of production. The remaining chapters focus on the way that gender worked itself out at the social site of employment during the nineteenth century, when that site was the factory. The sources used, however, are not only work-related documents associated with the mill and its employment practices, but they are also the social historian's sources, primarily census records, that can identify the structure of households and families in a community like Halstead.

Lown's reconstruction of "households" as "forms of living arrangement," and "families" as "constellations of ideals and attitudes," permits her to examine the way relationships were structured in terms of power and authority. The patriarchal head of a silkmaking household was the father and his children, husband to his wife, and master to his apprentices and servants, and he derived his authority from both relationships — the familial and the economic. When entrepreneurs like the Courtaulds set up the first mechanized mills for silkmaking, they used the language and ideology of paternalism to make sense of relationships between them and their employees.

The concept of Samuel Courtauld as father and provider, with the workers as his dependents and servants, was particularly convenient and effective since it depended upon the labour of women and children. Courtauld found that youthful female labour was less costly and more tractable than male labour. Furthermore, the women who worked for him, although